

Induced Development in Risky Locations: Fire Suppression and Land Use in the American West

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4:30 – 6:00 pm

Sheila Olmstead

Fellow, Resources for the Future

Each year, forest fires claim lives or damage property in the American West. Recent wildfires in Boulder and San Diego reveal that fires increasingly threaten more than just wilderness lands and park areas, but encroach on and endanger the homes of ordinary Americans. In this seminar, RFF Fellow Sheila Olmstead considers whether the federal government may be inadvertently contributing to the problem through its forest-fire fighting efforts. In a research project with RFF Fellow Carolyn Kousky, Olmstead tests the hypothesis that efforts by federal agencies to suppress fire on forestland, grassland and shrubland in the Western United States since 1970 have acted as a development subsidy, drawing new low-density residential and commercial development into regions at risk from wildland fire. Her analysis exploits a natural experiment – a major shift in federal fire suppression policy that occurred in the aftermath of catastrophic fires in Yellowstone National Park in 1988. She uses the Yellowstone event along with other sources of spatial and temporal variation in the benefits and costs of fire suppression between 1970 and 2000 to identify the effects of fire suppression on development. The study's results suggest that during periods when the federal government has intensified its expected suppression efforts on public lands, private residential and commercial development has accelerated on nearby land that would benefit from that suppression. The seminar will include a discussion of the research and its implications for public risk management.