

Deaths of firefighters challenge attitudes about saving houses

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RIVERSIDE, Calif. A blaze that killed five federal firefighters last year has challenged attitudes about saving homes on the edge of wilderness.

The five perished last fall while protecting an empty vacation home from a fire allegedly started by an auto mechanic now charged with murder.

However, the deaths also were blamed on social and political pressures and decisions to put before firefighter safety, according to a report.

As another fire season heats up, some U.S. forest Service officials say a shift in strategy is inevitable as firefighters increasingly risk their lives defending communities built in prime fire territory.

“We are not going to die for property”, said Tom Harbour, notional director of fire and aviation management for the Forest Service. “It’s time for homeowners to take responsibility of their homes.”

Chief Forester Gail Kimbell would not say whether the service is considering a change in policy on defending homes in certain fire conditions, but the agency plans to address flaws in the response to the deadly fire in remote Twin Pines and is conducting a longer term review of firefighter safety.