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A CNBC SPECIAL REPORT

Companies Court Homeowners With Fire-Protection Products

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By: Jeffrey Weiss,

Special to CNBC.com



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This has already been a bad year for wildfires.

According to the federal National Interagency Fire Center, more acres were burned in the first half of 2011 than any year since the agency started keeping statistics in 2000.

Bad fire seasons have been a long-term trend since the 1980s, says Chuck Bushey, president of the **International Association of Wildland Fire**.

"Probably the majority of us are firm believers in climate change," he says. "It doesn't matter what the source of it is from our perspective. Our perspective is it's happening now and we have to deal with it."

Add the ever-growing encroachment of people into formerly rural, wildfire-prone areas and you have the recipe for disaster — and a potential opportunity for businesses with products designed to help cope with the fires.



Source: GelTech Solutions / Mike Poslaiko

Firecel, by GelTech Solutions

Hundreds of businesses, many of them relatively small, provide products and services. Many of the products are aimed at professionals — from fire trucks to air tanks to specialized spray gear to protective clothing. But increasingly, companies are rolling out products aimed at homeowners.

Some are designed to help survive a disaster such as safe rooms, something like tornado

shelters. Others help recover from the aftermath including specialized cleanup gear.

But the most important products may be those that prevent the fire from damaging property and buildings.

"Once there is smoke in the air, options are very limited," says Bushey. A sprinkler system might sound like a good first line of defense. But sprinklers depend on plenty of water in short supply during a drought and electricity

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depend on plenty of water, in short supply during a drought, and electricity, often shut down once a wildfire hits an area.

So inventors have come up with ingenious alternatives, from automatic systems that cover homes in foam to user-friendly spray systems that dispense fire-killing gel to giant rolls of fire-resistant wrap that can seal a house like a steak in the freezer.

The evocatively named FireIce is one of the newer products on the market, sold by Florida-based **GelTech Solutions**. It starts as a powder that is mixed with water and power-sprayed onto whatever needs protecting.

The material was originally developed for an entirely different purpose, says company co-founder Peter Cordani.

So the story goes, Cordani says he was looking for a gel that could be sprayed into hurricanes to reduce their strength; instead, the recipe turned out to be incredibly fire-resistant. He routinely demonstrates the product by dipping his hand in a bucket of gel and then applying a blowtorch.

"If you were trapped in a burning building, you could get sprayed with this and protected for the minutes it might take to get you out," he says.

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Application on a house takes a few minutes and remains protective for a day or two. The gel, which is the consistency of thin applesauce, can withstand about two hours of direct heat, says Cordani.

While the company is happy to sell to fire departments, it has a kit designed for homeowners. For \$1,500 GelTech delivers a power sprayer with a nozzle designed for the gel, plus two buckets of the dry powder. One bucket generates enough gel to cover 1,250 square feet.

The gel made the **U.S. Forest Service's "qualified product list"** for wildfire use earlier this year.

Cordani is making the rounds of trade shows with his spectacular pyrotechnic demonstrations. In addition to torching his own hand, he's got a demonstration where he sets a car on fire and uses the gel to put the flames out in seconds.



Credit: Consumer Fire Products

FOAMSAFE Installation

"It's a sales job," he says. "It's a new way of fighting fires."

California-based **Consumer Fire Products** takes a different approach to blocking wildfires.

Founded by two firefighters, the company installs systems that quickly cover buildings with special foam at the first hint of nearby flames, something like the way automatic

sprinkler systems protect the interior of a building.

"We just got tired of seeing houses burn," says co-founder Irene Rhodes.

She has a background in firefighting and in engineering, two skills that proved useful in designing her system. For the Foamsafe Firemaster system, pipes are installed along the roof and exterior to provide total coverage. For the deluxe system, ultraviolet detectors are set to search for the telltale sign of a nearby



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fire.

The system is designed to be self-sufficient with its own power supply and a guaranteed water source — a swimming pool or specially dedicated reservoir. The foam offers up to 12 hours of protection, and the system can be designed to re-apply foam automatically if the owners aren't home or are forced to evacuate.

As with the FireIce gel, Rhodes says her system's foam is non-toxic.

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