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RETIRING

‘Do You Really Want to Rebuild at 80?’ Rethinking Where to Retire.

It’s a small yet noticeable shift, experts say — but climate change is causing retirees to start reconsidering moves to disaster-prone dream locales.

By Susan B. Garland

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Andrea Ucini

For a decade, Melissa and Guy Hoagland, both retired physicians in their 60s, had split their time between their homes on a barrier island in Florida and in Half Moon Bay, a small coastal city in the San Francisco Bay Area.

But the intensifying drought and wildfires in Northern California and escalating hurricanes and storm surges along the Southeastern coastline drove the couple to sell both houses.

Mulling the idea of living permanently in Southern California, the Hoaglands moved into a rental house in San Diego in 2019 after selling their West Coast property. But climate risks there, including drought and rising sea levels, put an end to that plan as well.

“We loved living along the coast, but we knew that life there was not sustainable for us in our old age,” Melissa Hoagland said.

The couple began to search for a safer place. They pored over climate data, including projections of rising temperatures, availability of fresh water and the northward expansion of tropical diseases. In 2022, they moved to Asheville, N.C., hoping to buy a house there.

A small but growing number of older people like the Hoaglands are taking climate change into account when choosing a retirement destination, real estate agents and other experts say. Armed with climate studies, many retirees are looking for communities that are less likely to experience extreme weather events, such as wildfires, drought and flooding.

David Dew, a real estate broker who sells homes near the Rappahannock River in and around White Stone, Va., said a larger number of retired clients were voicing concerns about weather patterns. With many waterfront properties in minimal danger of flooding there, the area is attracting retirees from the flood-ravaged Outer Banks of North Carolina as well as other Atlantic Ocean communities, he said.

“At first, they will say they want big views and deep water, but then they ask whether a hurricane or a nor’easter will wipe out the dock,” Mr. Dew said. “They want to be on the water but more protected.”

In an analysis of nearly 1.4 million home sales along Florida’s coasts, for example, University of Pennsylvania researchers found that the sales volume of homes in areas where 70 percent of developed land was less than six feet above sea level dropped by up to 20 percent between 2013 and 2018, while sales rose on less-vulnerable coastal land. Prices on homes in riskier areas declined between 2018 and 2020.

The lead researcher, Benjamin Keys, a professor of real estate and finance at the university’s Wharton School, said the biggest sales declines occurred in Florida coastal communities where retirees from the Northeast — particularly those who lived in counties exposed to Hurricane Sandy in 2012 — tended to move.

“It seems like Northeast retirees were looking at retirement differently,” Dr. Keys said. “On one hand, you have a strong demographic pull of baby boomers who are looking for warmer climate, and on the other hand, there is a newfound appreciation of climate risks.”

Florida coastal home sales and prices spiked during the pandemic as buyers fled urban living for warmer climes. But Dr. Keys said he expected the prepandemic trends would resume as fewer people feared living in densely populated areas and as remote work declined.

Aging and Climate Change Collide

Extreme weather can be particularly dangerous, and even deadly, for the elderly, who are more likely to have chronic medical conditions and disabilities, according to numerous studies.

Three-quarters of residents who died in the 2018 Camp Fire, which destroyed the Northern California community of Paradise, were 65 and older. Well over half of the record-high 323 people who died from heat-related causes in Arizona's Maricopa County in 2020 were at least 50. And two-thirds of the people who died in Florida during Hurricane Ian in September were 60 and older.

Frailty and cognitive impairments make it difficult for older people to evacuate and prepare their homes for disasters. Older people are also more likely than younger people to die from heat stroke. Extreme heat and wildfire smoke can worsen diabetes, heart disease and lung conditions.

"The ability to see a doctor during a king tide could be hard," said Mathew Hauer, an assistant professor of sociology at Florida State University in Tallahassee, using a term for exceptionally high tides. "And an ambulance may not be able to get to you."

These health-related dangers are certain to increase as rising sea levels coincide with the growing elderly population along the coasts, Dr. Hauer said.

In an analysis of all coastal counties in the United States, Dr. Hauer predicted that the proportion of people over 65 who lived in coastal communities would steadily rise, to about 37 percent of the population in 2100, compared with 16 percent today. That population would comprise older people moving in and younger people remaining into their later years.

"Two trends we know are happening — the impact of climate change at the same time the world is aging," Dr. Hauer said. "Those two trends, I'm afraid, will crash head-on, and we will see more catastrophic impacts than if either one had happened."

The Hoaglands said their stress was mounting as the climate risks on both coasts grew.

They moved to Florida in 1992 to raise their four children and practice medicine (Melissa, 64, as a pathologist and Guy, 65, as an internist). In 2011, they bought a house in the Bay Area, where Melissa had gone to medical school and had always dreamed of returning. They retired early, living in California in the summers and Florida in the winters.

Over the years, in Florida, hurricanes and storm surges up the Indian River threatened their home on a barrier island near Melbourne. During one storm, water jumped over a road within several feet of their house.

“Drainage was a problem on the roads,” Guy said. “I noticed the localized flooding was higher than it ever was.”

At the same time, wildfires, which were becoming more frequent, were spreading smoke in the Bay Area. An avid hiker, Guy began carrying an inhaler to help with exercise-induced asthma.

“The power company would cut power when the wind was up, for up to five days at a time,” he said. With extended drought came water restrictions.

What frightened them was the possibility of having to evacuate during a wildfire. They learned of one large fire in Northern California that had “advanced faster than 60 miles an hour,” Guy said. “You could not be able to drive faster than the fire. It felt apocalyptic.” The couple kept emergency bags at both houses.

“Even if you are a mobile older person, do you really want to rebuild at 80?” Melissa said.

As for Asheville, they said, their research showed the city was taking measures to reduce wildfire risk. Parts of the area are in a flood plain, but they plan to use climate data to make sure the house they buy and its surrounding neighborhood are not at risk.

Researching Climate Risks

The kind of data the Hoaglands used to search for a new destination is readily available online. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association’s [Climate.gov](#) includes links to trend data on floods, wildfires, drought, wind, disease and other climate hazards.

Prospective home buyers can also check out individual properties. [Risk Factor](#) provides data on anticipated wildfire, flooding and extreme heat risks for 145 million properties in the United States over the next 30 years.

Each property is ranked for each type of risk on a scale from 1 (minimal) to 10 (extreme). The online tool provides a percentage likelihood of the risk occurring over time — for example, that floodwaters could reach your house in the next five or 10 years or that the community could experience a certain number of 100-degree days. (ClimateCheck also provides [property-specific risk data](#) on heat, drought, fire, flood and storm.)

Redfin, Realtor.com and several other real estate firms are including Risk Factor climate projections with each listing.

The data appears to be changing the behavior of many home buyers. According to a Redfin analysis released in September, the company’s users who had viewed listings that scored at severe or extreme flood risk instead bid on homes with 54 percent less risk. The website’s users who did not have access to the data were more likely to bid on high-risk homes.

“This is the best evidence that people do respond to climate change risks when they are presented with the information,” said Daryl Fairweather, Redfin’s chief economist.

Ed Kearns, chief data officer of [First Street Foundation](#), the nonprofit that developed Risk Factor, said retirees considering homes that had some measurable risk could plan to reduce the exposure, perhaps by elevating a home or installing a fire-resistant roof.

“Check your exposure first, and then decide what you can do about that hazard,” he said. He recommends that prospective home buyers ask flood-plain managers and other officials about the protections the community has in place or plans to have.

Budgeting for Climate Change

In deciding where to move either full time or as snowbirds, older people should consider the possible financial costs of climate risks.

Expenses for hurricane windows, flame-resistant roofs, energy-efficient air-conditioning, home elevation and repairs from wind damage or flooding can take big bites out of even healthy retirement savings.

Robert Auclair, a certified financial planner in East Greenwich, R.I., advises retired clients who are considering a second home on the Southern coast to check out the climate by renting for a year first.

Mr. Auclair said his father-in-law, who lives north of Miami, was required by the homeowners’ association several years ago to update his wind-resistant windows and shutters. The cost: tens of thousands of dollars.

“These are expenses you would not ordinarily think of,” he said.

Before buying, retirees should ask several insurance companies about the cost and availability of homeowners’ coverage. Premiums are rising considerably in communities prone to wildfires, hurricanes or flooding, and many insurers are not renewing policies, limiting coverage or pulling out of high-risk markets.

Even if you know today’s cost, insurance can still be a wild card for retirees living with fixed incomes who need predictable expenses, Dr. Keys said.

“Some of this is about risk tolerance,” he said. “They should recognize that insurance will not cover everything and that the costs of insurance will keep going up.” He recommended that homeowners who live outside a flood plain but near water buy federally subsidized flood insurance.

For now, retired climate migrants such as the Hoaglands are the exceptions. Dr. Kearns of Risk Factor said he hoped more older people would step up efforts to protect themselves.

“Very often, you hear people say, ‘I don’t have to worry about climate change because I am 60 or 70 years old — this is a problem for my grandkids,’” he said. “I greatly disagree with that statement. Climate change is here, and it is affecting all of us.”