

OPINION

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Jae C. Hong/AP Photo
Tim Grant watches a wildfire burn in the
Cleveland National Forest near El Cariso, Calif.



IS CLIMATE CHANGE SPARKING RECORD-BREAKING FOREST FIRES?

PRO: Climate change clearly is a major culprit in the fires devastating the western US

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — California is burning, but it is hardly alone. Up and down the western half of the country, 92 wildfires are currently raging in states as diverse as Oregon, Alaska, Idaho and Arizona.

At the heart of the crisis, California is in the middle of another record-breaking fire season, with 820,000 acres across the state already ravaged — twice as many as by this point last year. Three of California's biggest recorded fires are burning right now.

We may be able to learn from California — a state that has larger populations, more extreme droughts, a history of intense forest management and greater susceptibility to warming than most.

Along with an intense fire season, 2018 is shaping up to be the fourth-warmest year on record, only exceeded by the three previous years.

In California, these warm years have been overlapping with the most intense drought in recorded history. Throughout the West, drought and heat have weakened trees and made them susceptible to disease and pests such as the pine beetle that devastates forests as far north as Canada.

Dead and weakened trees and excessive wood fuel from fire suppression have turned California into one giant tinderbox.

So can we blame those raging fires on human-induced climate change? Based on physical processes, elevated greenhouse gas concentrations make warmer temperatures, shifts in precipitation and climatic extremes much more likely.

Although there is still much to learn about the way fires burn, warmer temperatures and intense droughts facilitate extreme fire seasons

The costs of suppressing fires have reached an all-time high, a mind-boggling \$2.9 billion in 2017 for California alone, and it is time to take a no-nonsense look at what we can do better.

Yes, we can talk about extreme fires without mentioning what often cannot be named — climate change, but they are consistent with what scientists expect from global warming.

In the West, natural forest systems periodically burn with low-intensity fires that clear brush, help germination, and result in more fire, pest and disease-resistant open forests.

However, for over a century forest man-

agement has intercepted these processes and mainly centered on fire suppression.

The goals were laudable: Agencies kept the general public safe and protected lands and natural resources such as timber and oil.

Yet we may have done more harm than good. Although fire suppression may satisfy short-term goals, in the long run, it encourages the growth of denser forests with less fire-resistant species and more fuel, greatly exacerbating the size and intensity of wildfires.

While we cannot pin a particular fire on climate change, their bundled appearance is consistent with the processes scientists understand and can describe, measure and calculate.



IRIS STEWART FREY

And while part of our current fire crisis most certainly has its roots in forest management practices and human settlement patterns, we now have an opportunity to plan for a fire future without putting on blinkers when it comes to climate.

Healthy forests are vibrant ecosystems that provide us with water, timber, biodiversity, recreational opportunities and living spaces. They are part of why so many people find California and the West attractive places.

On our current trajectory, we continue to suppress low-intensity fires in increasingly warmer environments, and are setting ourselves up for more frequent and intense mega-fires.

Alternatively, we can rethink our path forward to help our forests establish a new equilibrium between tree growth, fuel generation, low-intensity fire and warmer temperatures.

Most likely that would mean some controlled burns and greater control of where and how people live in regions of high fire risk. It would also mean that we need to fund research and projects in areas as diverse as fire behavior, disaster preparedness, economic recovery and forest restoration.

We also need to accept a transition period to this new strategy and its outcomes. In the longer term, such an approach will save lives and help us develop adaptation strategies to protect our economic and natural assets in a changing world.

Iris Stewart Frey is an associate professor and chair of the Department of Environmental Studies at Santa Clara University.

CON: Climate change isn't causing California wildfires — blame lies with bad forest management

DALLAS — California is suffering, yet again, through a horrendous summer of wildfires that are destroying forests, homes — and lives. Many in the media seem to blame the size of the fires on climate change. President Donald Trump had a different take in a recent tweet: “California wildfires are being magnified & made so much worse by the bad environmental laws ... Must also tree clear to stop fire spreading!”

Trump is correct that human-caused policies may be playing a bigger role than human-caused climate change in the increasingly destructive wildfires.

For decades the U.S. Forest Service allowed logging companies to enter forests and clear out dead, stressed and diseased trees and underbrush — all of which are kindling for wildfires.

Between 1960 and 1990 roughly 10 billion to 12 billion board feet of timber was removed annually from national forests, according to the Forest Service. But a steady decline led to only about 2.5 billion board feet harvested in 2013, leaving forests filled with dead and diseased trees.

As the Forest Service reported last December, in California “the total number of trees that have died due to drought and bark beetles” reached an historic 129 million on 8.9 million acres. The dead trees continue to pose a hazard to people and critical infrastructure ...

You can say that again! But it doesn't have to be that way — and it wasn't in the past.

California Rep. Tom McClintock, the Republican chairman of the Subcommittee on Federal Lands, said at a committee hearing last year: “The sale of excess timber ... provided a steady stream of revenue to the treasury and thousands of jobs to support local families. We could match and maintain tree density to the ability of the land to support it.”

But, he continued, “Forty-five years ago, we began imposing laws that have made the management of our forests all but impossible.”

The result of those changes has been a rapid expansion, not so much in the number but the size of wildfires.

The Government Accountability Office has published a chart showing the total number of national forest acreage burned between 1910 and 1997 — national forests, as opposed to state and private forests, are mostly in western

MORE PHOTOS

View some of this summer's devastating wildfires that are torching Western US states and those who are fighting them.

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states. Wildfires took between 300,000 and 400,000 acres annually between 1940 and 1985. There has been a steady increase ever since. The current California wildfires have consumed more than 1 million acres, according to the Forest Service.

Why the decades of smaller fires? Better-managed forests, especially when management focused on “select cutting.”

But one of the purposes of the National Forest Management Act of 1976 was to protect national forests from excessive logging. And it required forest planning based on a consensus of groups, including environmental organizations that tended to oppose the logging.

In addition, the Endangered Species Act tied the hands of effective management if specific actions would have a perceived negative impact on threatened species.

Such changes ultimately made forest management, in McClintock's words, “all but impossible.”

The irony is that California Gov. Jerry Brown is dedicated to reducing carbon emissions — using more renewable energy sources, imposing higher mileage standards on cars and trucks, etc. But the wildfires that have grown so extensive on his watch undermine those efforts.

The earth has been on a gradual warming trend since the last ice age; there is very little humans can do about that. And many climate scientists concede that most carbon-reducing proposals would have minimal impact on rising temperatures.

But there is a lot we can do about reducing the size and intensity of wildfires, which would also reduce carbon emissions. And it starts with embracing policies that were standard practice decades ago. Well-managed forests are much safer and less-costly forests.

Merrill Matthews is a resident scholar with the Institute for Policy Innovation.