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Squandering Federal Hazardous Fuel Reduction Funds

Although the cool and rainy weather we have recently been experiencing in Montana may push concerns about wildfires far from our minds as summer officially begins, the hundreds of wildfires that north central Alberta has already experienced, some on the outskirts of Edmonton, should remind us of what the heat of the summer has often meant in the West over the last decade.

The threat of wildfire to homes and communities is not a theoretical one. Across the nation between 2002 and 2006, 10,000 homes were destroyed by wildfire. Part of this loss is tied to climate change, increasingly hot and dry summers, but much of it is tied to residential sprawl out into forested landscapes many of which are classified as high severity fire areas. During the 1990s the number of homes located in the wildland-urban interface increased by two-thirds and that trend continued into the 2000s.

That steadily rising threat of wildfires to communities and homes across the West was used earlier this decade by the Bush Administration to pass the mislabeled “Healthy Forest Initiative and Healthy Forests Restoration Act.” The primary objective of that law was (and I quote) “long term hazardous fuels reduction...to reduce the risks of catastrophic wildland fire to communities.” That law mandated that 50 percent of the fuel reduction funding be allocated to the “wildland-urban interface” where communities and homes were most at risk from wildfire.

A study¹ published earlier this month in the journal of the National Academy of Sciences by scientists from the University of Montana and University of Colorado, investigated just how the billions of dollars Congress has appropriated for wildfire mitigation and hazardous fuels treatment have actually been spent. Those scientists looked at all 45,000 fuels treatment projects spread over 7.4 million acres of the West between 2004 and 2008.

What these scientists found was more than a little disconcerting. Only 3 percent of the areas treated in the 11 Western states were within the wildland-urban interface. Another 8 percent of the acres treated were within the 1.5-mile community protection buffer zone beyond the wildland-urban interface. So a total of 11 percent of the hazardous fuels reduction activity took place where it would directly protect homes, people, and communities, not the 50 percent mandated. Most of the acres treated were far removed from communities and homes, confirming skeptics' suspicions that fear of wildfire was just being used to expand commercial logging. It was that suspicion that led to the 50 percent mandate in the law, a mandate opposed by timber interests.

But that was just the beginning of the distortions in how the fuels treatment funds were used. Although 71 percent of the combined wildland-urban interface and the 1.5-mile buffer around it is privately owned and only 17 percent is federal

¹ "Implementation of National Fire Plan treatments near the wildland-urban interface in the western United States," Tania Schoennagel, Cara R. Nelson, David M. Theobald, Gunnar C. Carnwath, and Teresa B. Chapman, PNAS Early Edition, www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.0900991106 .

land, 68 percent of fuels treatments in the wildland-urban interface was on federal land and only 30 percent of it was spent on making private lands safer.

So the vast majority of the land treated was far removed from where people, homes, and communities are threatened and the vast majority of the small amount of land that was treated near homes and communities was not the land closest to homes.

Clearly, land ownership patterns make it difficult for federal agencies to spend the money where it will do the most good. It is far easier for federal agencies to proceed quickly with treating their own land than it is to work with private landowners to reduce the threat to homes. Also federal land managers are focused, understandably, on vegetative manipulation as opposed to making homes fire resistant. Removing trees, even at great distance from homes, is the type of “fire protection” foresters understand and have been trained to do. So the observed biases in the outcome of the hazardous fuels reduction work are what one would expect from a bureaucratic perspective.

The problem is that there is growing evidence that fuels treatment far removed from human habitation does **not** reduce the risk to homes and communities. On the other hand, there is clear and strong evidence that management of vegetation and fuels **immediately** around homes and modifications of structures to make them more resistant to wildfire **is** highly effective in reducing the loss of homes and lives.

There lies the legislative challenge. We are currently misspending billions of dollars in ways that do nothing to protect homes and communities from

wildfires. How do we shift those funds from federal lands to private lands and shift them from treating forests to treating residential lots and homes? Even more challenging, how do we discourage people from locating homes in dangerous places where wildfires will inevitably threaten them and where firefighters' lives and much public treasure will ultimately be lost trying to shield those residents from the costly consequences of their own risky home location decisions?