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Lessons from the 2007 Southern California Fires

Changes in weather, the end of the deadly Santa Ana winds, overcast skies, and higher humidity, have brought the Southern California wildfires under control, just as rain and cool temperatures brought the wildfires in Western Montana under control in August.

It is humbling to face up to the fact that although we can often protect structures and sometimes can steer fires away from human habitation, it is often the case that wildfires are so powerful a natural force, like hurricanes and floods, that we do not have the means to stop them. With the Santa Ana winds howling at close to a hundred miles an hour pushing fires through drought-stricken mountain and canyon lands, even firefighting aircraft had to be grounded and the firefighters themselves pulled out of the fires' paths.

The destruction, disruption, and sheer terror triggered by massive wildfires has touched off the same debates in Southern California that we have had across the West for almost two decades, starting with the Yellowstone Park fires. Just who are we to blame for the threat posed to our continued settlement and habitation of the West by these massive wildfires?

The conventional wisdom, once promoted by environmentalists and ecologists but now embraced by the timber industry and the public land managers, is that changes in land management during the 20th century have allowed an unnatural build up of hazardous fuels on our forest-, grass-, and scrublands. Fire suppression is often pointed

to as eliminating regular, low-intensity fires, laying the basis for infrequent catastrophic fires. Timber interests argue that reductions in timber harvest have allowed much higher densities of smaller trees that provide ladder fuels that turn what would be light ground fires into destructive crown fires. Environmentalists point to livestock grazing eliminating the fine fuels from forest- and grasslands, leaving behind increasingly woody and hotly flammable plants. They see logging opening up forest lands to sunlight and wind that dry them out, producing flammable waste slash, and increasing human access and human caused fires.

But removing most of the natural vegetation does not necessarily bring fire protection. In Southern California some of the areas that burned in 2003 supported the movement of fire this month rather than serving as fire breaks. Part of the reason for that is that very flammable invasive annual grasses now quickly move into burned and thinned areas. As a result, these areas can burn every year, potentially adding to fire danger rather than reducing it.

But the more basic point is that in drought conditions, with rising temperatures, and strong Santa Ana winds, almost anything can burn: young, medium- and old-age trees alike, scrublands, and grasslands, all can be fanned into flames as firebrands are carried thousands of feet or even miles ahead by the strong winds. This is not new. The original European visitors to Southern California remarked on the smoke and fires. With global warming and other climate changes, the frequency, intensity, and extent of these fires, however, may be on the rise.

The “damage” that has gotten most of our attention is not, of course, the scorching of scrublands but the loss of human life, the burning of homes, and the

disruption and costs associated with evacuating hundreds of thousands of people. In that sense the primary problem has nothing to do with the condition of the natural landscape, it has to do with the fact that hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people are moving into natural landscapes that have a high probability of burning. That very habitation increases the likelihood of human's directly or indirectly, unintentionally or intentionally, starting fires. Powerlines in high winds, for instance, are much more likely to start a "wild" fire in Southern California than lightning.

As the firefighters repeatedly complained, many of the new residents of these flammable, wild landscapes did not take the most basic steps to protect their property. They kept the natural vegetation that was at least partly the attraction of the area to them to begin with. Others added flammable ornamental shrubs and trees. They built on steep canyon sides and on ridgelines, remote from fire control infrastructure, making their property almost indefensible from any wildfire. In this setting, it makes no sense to blame the loss of life and property on the condition of the natural landscape. It is large numbers of people choosing to inhabit dangerous landscapes that is the source of the losses. And, with California's population projected to add tens of millions of new inhabitants over the next several decades just as climate changes increase the likelihood of uncontrollable wildfires, the frightening drama of burning homes and highways clogged with evacuees will become even more frequent.

That does not mean we should adopt a fatalistic attitude towards these losses. What it means is that we have to focus on human behavior, not on trying to fire-proof the natural landscape. When people build in flood-, earthquake-, or hurricane-prone areas, they are forced to build to meet certain safety standards and are forbidden to

build in some places. It is to land-use planning, building codes, and lot maintenance requirements that we should be turning rather than focusing our fear and anger on nature herself, while arrogantly dreaming of spending tens of billions of dollars engineering our natural landscapes to make them fireproof so that we can continue to make irresponsible residential location decisions.