

Who is Ultimately Responsible for Our Current Wildfires Disasters and What Can We Do?

The cost of today's wildfires is often measured in lives lost, buildings destroyed, and acres burned. Just in the 2020 California wildfire season alone (to October 2020) more than 30 people were killed, about 8,500 structures were destroyed, and completely devastated a record-breaking 4 million acres of land! This was double the acreage burned in 2018 and the state's second-worst wildfire season on record. Costs for the 2020 wildfire season in California alone are in excess of \$12 billion dollars!

Due to the ever increasing wildfire threat, homeowners and business owners (in or near the urban-interface) are basically unable to obtain fire insurance since the state has allowed most of the private insurance companies to pull out of the California urban-interface market. For those who are unable to obtain fire insurance in the private market, they must now turn to the State of California "Fair-Plan" administered by the state. And contrary to what the name implies, the costs of the state run program far exceeds (usually 4 times or higher) previous rates for fire coverage only! Then an additional and separate policy must be obtained for the remaining coverages such as theft, water, damage, and etcetera. So the name "Fair-Plan" is actually an oxymoron! Insurance rates in the urban-interface have literally quadrupled with the state administered plan and they've one of the governmental agencies who created this wildland disaster throughout our forests!

There is also a tone, that agencies state / federal and industry are the problem and have a direct cause and effect to our increasing wildfire catastrophes! Since the early 1900's, The California Division of Forestry (now CAL FIRE), The U.S. Forest Service, and The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) have been tasked with "maintaining our forests" in California and states throughout our nation.

In fact, the CAL FIRE "History Page" states that "*CAL FIRE is a State agency responsible for protecting natural resources from fire on land designated by the State Board of Forestry as State Responsibility Area (SRA). CAL FIRE also manages the State Forest system and has responsibility to enforce the forest practice regulations, which govern forestry practices on private and other non-federal lands. Two major themes are attendant to the CAL FIRE mission. One is the protection of the State's merchantable timber on all non-federal lands from improper logging activities and the other is the protection of the State's grass, brush, and tree covered watersheds in SRA from wildland fire. The U.S. Forest Service became the Nation's primary instrument, for protecting natural resources on Federal land from fire and from timber exploitation. In the teens the National Park Service was established, and charged with protecting the Nation's scenic wonders. Both agencies, however, were protecting only those areas of federally owned land under their jurisdiction and such private in-holdings that could potentially threaten the well-being of the Federal lands. The large areas of timber and watershed lands privately owned that were beyond the National Forests and Parks came under the State authority."*

The U.S. Forest Service web page states "*The Forest Service stewards an impressive portfolio of landscapes across 193 million acres of National Forests and Grasslands in the public trust. The agency's top priority is to maintain and improve the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of current and future generations. Forest management focuses on managing vegetation, restoring ecosystems, reducing hazards, and maintaining forest health.*"

The Bureau of Land Management's web page states, "*The mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.*"

We have to ask, have the actions of these three governmental agencies (CALFIRE, U.S. Forest Service & BLM) been successful toward their mission statements? Has the stated expectations, actions and endeavors of these three governmental agencies been effective in the competent management of our forest lands? The facts speak for themselves, and it's obviously apparent with the rapid escalation of the recent massive uncontrollable wildfire events that these three agencies have mismanaged and drastically failed at maintaining our forests in a "nature-like" fashion for many years! Their actions (or lack thereof) have directly resulted in the horrendous fuel levels that are now causing and the major contributing factor in these devastating uncontrollable wildfires!

Over the past 100 years, these three agencies, have actually allowed and contributed to our national forests downfall by practicing poor fire management techniques and allowed the fuel loads in these forests to grow to horrendous levels. They have virtually mismanaged our forests from natural wonders to areas with vastly over-planted trees, thick underbrush, ladder fuels that extend from the forest floor to the lower tree canopies, sickly trees fighting for sunlight and water, not to mention the devastating Bark Beetle infestations resulting in huge dead stands of timber throughout our forests.

These three agencies have managed to turn our "nature controlled forest areas" into vast over-forested lands that can no longer protect themselves as nature intended! Our forests are now income-driven timber lands, whose sole purpose is to produce wood products at unnatural levels! We no longer have healthy natural forests, but unfortunately have "vertical lumber yards" throughout our state and nation! Surely, had the westward immigrating pioneers of the 1800's encountered our current forest conditions, their westward wagon travel would have taken decades rather than months due to the necessity to clear a path through over-planted trees that our forests now contain.

To objectively look at these recent escalating and devastating wildfire events, one must look at all the factors involved. Fire, requires three key components to occur; heat, fuel and oxygen referred to as the "Fire Triangle".

- **Heat-** is usually in the form of an ignition source being from nature (lightning) or by man (arson, discarded cigarettes, accidental or equipment failures (electrical wires). The simple arc of an electrical wire does not solely cause a conflagration, but is only part of the key factors that are now in place due to man's 100 years of fire suppression. Actually, the equipment from utility companies has contributed to starting wildland fires since they've existed. However, prior to our current forest fuel loads, the fires back 50-100 years ago were easier to manage and extinguish with minimal crews and effort since they weren't the fuel driven conflagrations we experience today.
- **Fuel-** is the accumulation of dead, dying trees, over-planted trees, ladder fuels (bushes of manzanita, poison oak, sage, grasses and countless other species) that have been allowed to grow in size so that they span from the forest floor to the lower tree branches. It's also the accumulation of forest floor duff (also called **detritus**, duff and the O horizon) It is one of the most distinctive features of a forest ecosystem. It mainly consists of dry, shed vegetative parts, such as leaves, needles, branches, bark, and stems, existing in various stages of decomposition above the soil surface.
- **Oxygen-** is just that, the oxygen in the air that we and fires breathe.

One may ask, so what about “Global Warming” and its impact on our forests? Global Warming is indeed a factor in our wildfires since it contributes to the drying out the fuels and reducing moisture and rain levels. Global Warming also moves and increases the time the wildfire events occur, from later in the year to earlier in the year or even throughout the year, instead of the fires being “seasonal” as they once were. Unfortunately, California has always had dry warm summers throughout my lifetime, and traditionally from July to October has been “Fire Season”. Even though we’ve experienced a drought-year this winter season, it has only managed to move the fire season a month earlier and perhaps extend later in the year. After all dry is dry, whether it’s in June or July.

So one can clearly see, that the only factor that has substantially changed in our forest lands is the accumulation and increased fuel levels. Fuel levels alone have transformed what were once manageable forest fires into raging uncontrollable, devastating wildfire conflagrations.

So what can and should be done to correct this ugly, intolerable situation? Is the hiring of additional fire personnel and equipment (planes, helicopters, dozers and engines) the only answer? Well possibly, but even if we had a million additional firefighters and an Air Force squadron of additional aircraft, these wildfire events would remain “uncontrollable” to a certain degree due to the weather (winds) that these fires produce, the erratic and severe fire conditions they create, which are all directly due to fuel loads in our forests! In fact, the State Fire Marshal’s Office within Cal Fire, under their “Wildfire Prevention Engineering Program” states that “*Wildfire Prevention Engineering processes reduce or eliminate fire hazards and risks, and change the environment by removing or reducing the heat source, modifying or reducing the fuels (this is where our defensible space program resides), and modifying the act or omission allowing the heat source to contact ignitable fuels.*” The only problem with the “Defensible Space” program is that the fires in the surrounding forests are of such magnitude due to the fuel loads that the individual property owner’s defensible space does little to slow or stop these massive encroaching fires, especially when they become crown fires!

Is there an immediate way to reverse these decades of mismanagement? What if anything can be done to reduce these fuel loads and reduce the frequency and magnitude of these devastating destructive fires in a timely fashion? Obviously, personnel and equipment are only a small part of a comprehensive plan that needs to be addressed for our state and national forests to survive. As well as providing those who live near or in the forest areas (wildland-urban interfaces) a chance at survival and a reasonable amount of safety. Listed below is what we may want to consider as a change of direction in managing our forests.

Suggested Plan:

- Stop managing our forests as if they were solely for the purpose of timber farms and STOP creating **vertical lumber yards**, especially surrounding those communities near or in the wildland-urban interface.
- As a temporary stop-gap measure, create large fire breaks around our wildland-urban interface communities. This would be labor and equipment intensive and involve reducing all fuel levels (tree numbers, ladder fuels and ground fuels). These fire safe areas would have to be measured in miles and create natural areas where “crown fires” could no longer occur and natural or man-made ground fires could roam free to burn the underbrush without fear of becoming a raging inferno.

To eventually save all of our state and national forests:

It's essential that the reduction of tree numbers (and spacing) back to levels they were when the forests grew as nature intended must start immediately. Instead of trees being planted and growing literally inches apart as they are now, reducing their numbers to reflect the spacing of a natural forest is the only answer. Reducing the number of trees and increasing their spacing will drastically reduce the likelihood of "crown-fires" where the fire literally jumps from tree to tree and at the same time, allow for healthier trees not competing for sunlight and water. It would reduce the devastating effects of the Bark Beetle and other insects throughout our forests.

- Reduce the ladder fuels.
- Reduce the ground fuels.
- Once fuel levels are reduced, allow for natural or man-made fires to burn as nature intended (hopefully supervised).
- If huge timber farms are still needed to support our building industry, then create these heavily wooded forests in secluded areas far from wildland-urban interface areas with limited access and large fire breaks surrounding them.

It's obvious, that any measures to undo man's detrimental effects on our forests will literally take decades, after all it took a hundred years of mismanagement for them to get into this horrendous condition. Nonetheless, we have to start somewhere and the current solution is nothing more than stop-gap measure, for our forests will continue to deteriorate at a rate we cannot contain and global warming will surely not go away soon.

If these fuel reduction measures are implemented, then and only then will firefighters have a chance at returning to the days when wildfires were predictable, somewhat controllable and much less destructive. We need to think smarter, think for the future and not just irresponsibly throwing money at a problem in hopes it will go away.

Don't think that just because you live in an area that's not in a wildland-interface that you are free from the danger or harmful effects of these fires! The toxic smoke and chemical water runoff from these fires will plague us all for many years to come. It's now in the air we breathe and will be in the ground water and oceans for years to come.

So, where do we go from here or what can we do as individuals that have been impacted, or may be impacted in the future by these devastating wildfires? First, if you agree with what I've written spread the word! Post it on your favorite social media site, web-site, send it to your friends and neighbors or your local news station. Contact your elected officials, Governor, Insurance Commissioner, State Fire Chief (CAL FIRE), or Governing Fire Board and let them know your concern and voice your opinion regarding the direction we should be headed! Lastly, I'm no attorney, but considering that our state and federal agencies have allowed this to happen under their management is nothing short of irresponsible and criminal and perhaps a Class Action lawsuit is in order to help those who have suffered so much.

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