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## As climate changes, sprawl becomes an increasing fire risk

By Tim Palmer Nov. 22, 2018

Fires raging this autumn in California remind us of the increasing danger from wildfire in the age of climate change. While still reeling from tragedy, people wonder what can be done.

With daily reports of losses accumulating, this is not the time for blame. Unfortunately, while the suffering on the front lines could not be more tragic, our president — with no factual basis or grounding — tweeted on Nov. 10, “There’s no reason for these massive, deadly and costly forest fires in California except that forest management is so poor. ... remedy now, or no more Federal payments.”

In fact, the fires he referred to were not even in forests subject to government officials’ control but rather on private land and in brushy chaparral.

Yet the greater disconnect here owes to people who probably advise the president with widespread but misleading arguments that forests must be cut to prevent them — and our communities — from burning.

So, what *can* we do to diminish the threat of fires? And how can people from every walk of life and every responsibility come together and work toward solutions that make sense for all?

First, protect our houses with fire-resisting measures and create defensible space around them. This won’t stop the fires, and it won’t guarantee escape from damage, but good results are proven, and experts agree that this is the single most effective and affordable option to reduce losses. How-to tips are easily found.

Second, thinning the thickets of young trees that have grown in the wake of clear cuts characterizing commercial forest harvest for the past century can help when that thinning is done as buffers at the edge of communities, rural neighborhoods and roads strategically selected as firebreaks.

Next, we must protect from logging the mature forests that remain. These are where fires cool owing to old trees’ thick bark that’s comparatively fire-resistant; to large trees’ long boles, or trunks, that shed low limbs that would otherwise provide a ladder for flames to climb high; and to big trees’ shade that keeps the ground cooler and less filled with brush and young trees that are explosively flammable.

Old forests are not immune to fire, but in all but extreme conditions, they are less likely to burn intensely. Likewise, we must restore our forests to mature and less ignitable conditions where possible.

Onward, our local governments need to recognize fire hazard as a public issue, because fires are endangering public investments, firefighters, and established residents and communities. At a minimum, areas most prone to fire should be identified and prospective home builders warned about investing and living in harm's way.

Ordinances should require protective measures for new development. Further, planning programs need to favor and facilitate development within established communities — which are more defensible — rather than allowing a continued trend toward scattered development in remote and indefensible fire zones.

Finally, we all need to recognize that the principal cause of intensifying fires is climate change.

Worsening wildfires are inevitable owing to warming temperatures, increasing drought and severely hot winds. Together, these create blazes overcoming any defenses we can muster and any type of forestry prescription one might imagine. The problem will grow until we reverse the trend of global warming.

The principal means of doing that is to move beyond a fossil-fuel economy and toward renewable energy sources.

No silver bullet is available, but it's time to work together for long-term solutions that put vested interests and misinformation aside and engage in the future with new commitments, new determination, and new responsibilities to meet the challenges of a changing world.

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