

The Register-Guard

Opinion

Guest View: Fire and the climate of tomorrow

By Tim Palmer

Posted at 12:01 AM

Fire season has officially begun in Oregon, and we'll be lucky to escape the summer without a lot of smoke and flame. Exceptional dryness could bring a repeat of the charcoaled ordeal of three years ago. Facing an uncertain future, rural and small-town Oregonians live on the front line of damage from a warming climate, and the question is not *if*, but *when* the next big fire will arise.

The reason is simple: A hotter climate makes fires worse. We've always had fuel and sources of ignition, but the climate is now dramatically hotter and projected to get more extreme if decisive action is not taken. Just to get the drift here, Death Valley hit 128 degrees this year, which promises to be one of the hottest on record worldwide.

With the heat comes low humidity and hot wind. My own town could burn to the ground, just like Paradise, California, in 2018. Remote rural areas are even more vulnerable — “fire bait” — as some now call homes scattered in the woods and on distant ridgelines.

But back to the trio of factors for flame: Fuel is needed, but fire-inducing weather has become so intensified that any assortment of burnables will ignite given half a chance. Note the aerial photos of Paradise, showing that airborne embers blown by 50 mph winds leapt house to house, finding fuel wherever people lived. And regarding the fire analysts' third factor — ignition — lightning on mountaintops is the big fear, and growing heat creates the updrafts that spawn the dangerously dry thunderstorms. The hotter the climate gets, the more lightning we're going to see.

The climate problem is something we all created through the greenhouse effect that results from burning fossil fuels along with converting the Earth's stores of solid carbon in trees and soil into gaseous carbon dioxide that traps solar heat. We'll continue to make global warming worse until

we take decisive action by graduating from fossil fuels to renewable energy such as solar power, and until we effectively sequester solid carbon in big trees and recapture it in healthy soil full of plant matter the way organic and other good farmers do.

Of course we should make our homes as fire-resistant as possible. In fact, that's the only immediate improvement we can make.

We can also care for our forests better and convert from the inflammatory overcrowded plantations that rise in the wake of clear-cutting and work toward mature forests once again. Old trees, with thick fire-resistant bark, with long boles holding ignitable limbs far above the reach of ground fires and with shaded cooler microclimates burn less than the explosive thickets of young trees sprouting in the clear-cutter's wake.

But all attempts to address the fire problem will be futile without coming to grips with the warming climate.

So why don't we do it?

Politicians who are sent from rural Oregon to virtually every commissioner's office and to the capitol in Salem either do nothing about the heating climate or they derisively and proudly oppose action aimed at confronting this deadly plague that delivers the drought, heat and wind that make the fires inevitable. All we hear from them is "Log more." Plus, "Don't raise the price of gasoline and diesel even one single penny." And, after it's too late, they yell at the Forest Service: "Go put out the fires."

Rural Oregonians deserve better. So does everybody. But we in small towns and across the countryside live directly in the path of damage from a climate that's heating out of control. The threats extend beyond our homes and personal health and safety, imperiling livelihoods and economies in everything from timber — there will be no trees to cut once they've burned down — to recreation that now accounts for most of the jobs in many rural areas, to fisheries that need cold shaded streams, and to real estate, for which fire insurance is becoming harder or impossible to get.

We might be lucky this year and spared a smoky mess. But luck is not what you want to depend on to survive, let alone to thrive or to bequeath your children a safe home. Without coming to grips with the climate that we've been changing, the chances of evading fire are slim in the years to come, and no one will be harmed more than rural Oregonians.

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