

Let-it-burn ideology is dangerous

Bill Acord, Jim Henson and Hardie Tatum Published 11:29 a.m. PT June 28, 2017 | Updated 11:29 a.m. PT June 28, 2017

One doesn't need to write 38 books about wildfire to understand that fuel loads influence the size and severity of forest fires. Decades of scientific research and practical on-the-ground experience strongly indicate that reducing fuel loads on the forests helps prevent catastrophic wildfires. Yet a recent guest columnist, and self-described author and expert, denied in this newspaper the relationship between fuel loads and fire intensity, presumably to defend his extreme "let-it-burn" ideology.

More: [Climate vs. logging in forest fire causes \(/story/opinion/readers/2017/06/21/climate-vs-logging-forest-fire-causes/412779001/\)](/story/opinion/readers/2017/06/21/climate-vs-logging-forest-fire-causes/412779001/)

Over the past decade we have seen six of the 10 largest wildfires in our state's history. Since 2001, California's National Forests have lost 558,000 acres per year to wildfire. At the same time, 76 percent of California's forested lands are considered to be in unhealthy condition.

We now have over 102 million dead trees in the state, and the Cal Fire estimates that two-thirds of these dead trees are located on our unmanaged and overgrown national forest lands.

California's national forests naturally grow approximately 3.7 billion board feet every year. Yet the U.S. Forest Service in California has abdicated its responsibility to harvest timber and thin dangerously overgrown stands. On average, between 2000 and 2014, the U.S. Forest Service only sold 317 million board feet. That is just 8.5 percent of annual growth and, alarmingly, 37.6 percent of annual mortality.

What is driving this mortality? The Forest Service Inventory and Analysis program found that, on average, there are 321 softwood trees per acre on our national forests. Historically, these forests had around 20-100 trees per acre. The overgrowth contributes to intense competition among trees for soil and nutrients, resulting in tree stands that are less resilient to natural disturbances such as fire, disease and insect infestations. Once a fire is ignited, the accumulation of ground and ladder fuels results in crown fires that devastate the landscape, sterilize the soil, threaten our water supplies, and threaten lives, homes and property.

The legacy of "hands-off" forest management and the "let-it-burn" philosophy is that California is losing its forests. Since the mid-1980s, the Forest Service's California Region has accumulated a 3.46 million-acre backlog of identified reforestation needs, or forest lands burned in wildfires and never restored. What were once abundant green forests are now brushfields.

If Californians are concerned about climate change and carbon emissions, they should support efforts to increase the pace and scale of projects on our national forests. The Sierra Nevada Conservancy found that the 2013 Rim Fire emitted over 11 million metric tons of greenhouse gas, the equivalent of the annual emissions from 2.3 million cars, and a year's worth of electricity for 1.5 million homes.

One does not have to write a book, or claim to be an expert, to understand that forest management is a choice. We can actively manage our forests and reduce the risks of catastrophic wildfire, insects and disease. Or, we can walk away from our forests and live with the consequences. One only needs to look at the current state of California's national forests to learn how the latter approach has worked for the past 25 years.

Bill Acord is president of the Loggers Association of Northern California. Jim Henson is president of the Sierra Cascade Logging Conference. Hardie Tatum is president of Associated California Loggers.

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