



Correction Please

Politicians, Eco-activists, Judges Fiddle; Golden State Burns



Item: *In the midst of wildfires in California, Time magazine (November 26/December 3 issue) stressed that the Golden State is “still reeling from a drought that killed off trees and plants earlier this decade, leaving acres of tinder behind,” saying that “long-term global warming promises to exacerbate the problem. ‘Things like this will be part of our future,’ California Governor Jerry Brown said at a Nov. 11 press conference. ‘Things like that, and worse.’”*

Item: *The London-based Economist for November 17 cited what it called the prime reason that “California has been besieged by flames.” The publication identified the supposed main villain (and updated Governor Brown’s prediction), saying that “the climate is becoming warmer. This has led to snow melting earlier, drier landscapes and a longer season when fires are likely to ignite. In western states the average fire season is 84 days longer than it was in the 1970s.”*

Item: *The New York Times for November 18, reporting on President Trump’s visit to the ashes of a site of a Northern California fire, faulted the president for repeating “his view” about poor forest management — calling this (in a bold-faced pull-quote) a “disputed claim.” The paper impugned the notion that “forest management — the partial clearing and cleaning of brush from forests — was partly to blame for the string of immense and deadly wildfires in recent years.”*

Item: *The Washington Post, in a “California, burning” editorial on November 15 subtitled “If the president is worried about wildfires, he should take a look at his own policies,” concluded its extended diatribe as follows: “If Mr. Trump thinks the bill for governmental mismanagement is high now, wait until the costs for his administration’s abdication on climate change come due.”*

Item: *Using wildfires in California and a recent hurricane in Florida as examples, a member of the New York Times’ “climate team” propounded a scary and ever-escalating scenario in a November 20 piece (entitled “‘Like a Terror Movie,’ How Changing Climate Will Multiply Disasters”).*

Correction: We used to fight fire with fire, but after zealous green pressure groups and their allies gained the upper hand, uncontrolled blazes have been on the rampage in California.

Fractious ideology, often driven by partisan predispositions, has dominated the contentions over accountability concerning the wildfires in California and elsewhere in the West. Players from the political Left, bolstered by media accomplices, have again scripted Donald Trump and the hobgoblin “climate change/global warming” as the heavies in their tragic theatrical productions.



Written by [William P. Hoar](#) on December 24, 2018

Published in the December 24, 2018 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 34, No. 24

For his part, the president has once more used a blunderbuss when he could have aimed more precisely.

This was demonstrated when the president tweeted broadly that “there is no reason for these massive, deadly and costly forest fires in California except that forest management is so poor.” Poor forestry management assuredly deserves blame, but what is behind the situation is more complex than that.

As a spokesman for a national logging organization has noted, “President Trump blamed poor forest management for wildfires in California and throughout the West, and there is truth to statements he has made.” Daniel Dructor, executive vice president of the American Loggers Council (ALC), a coalition of state and regional associations that represents independent contract loggers, also recognized that “there is truth that drought and changing conditions are contributing to the problem.”

Dructor went on, in a statement in mid-November: “It’s time to rise above political posturing and recognize that active forest management — including logging, thinning, grazing and controlled burning — are tools that can and must be used to reduce fire risks and help mitigate the impacts to landscapes.” According to the ALC, upwards of 80 million acres of national forest are at “high, to very high, risk of catastrophic wildfire.”

The ALC spokesman continued, saying, “It is no accident that the U.S. Forest Service is struggling to reduce fire risks in places such as California and the Southwest, where this infrastructure has been allowed to disappear due to the decline of timber harvests on federal lands.” The council calls for partnering between the private sector and the federal government on projects to reduce risks.

Some do see the forest for the trees. Asked to specify the leading cause of recent fires, a spokesman for the Forest Service answered: “Forests are overstocked. There are more trees than 100 years ago.”

There are also more squabbling politicians. Nevertheless, at least for the one day when they met at a devastated California site, President Trump and Governor Brown made what were effectively conciliatory statements that recognized both climatic and governmental managerial effects. Of course, when they lowered their voices, it got less media attention.

Few anticipate that the attacks against Trump or doom-saying charges about climate change will end. The media items cited above, among countless others, refute that. (Brown’s senior environmental advisor has said the governor believes “climate change” isn’t being treated as urgently as it should be and wants it to be addressed “on a World War III footing.”)

The most recent huge wildfire — named Camp Fire, which was ignited on November 8 in Butte County in Northern California in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada — was declared to have been contained on November 25. The blaze was the most deadly in the state’s history, with at least 85 being killed, and nearly 19,000 buildings destroyed. Camp Fire, according to officials, spread through dry forests and was fanned by the strong winds typical of the state. It burned around 153,000 acres.

It won’t be the last one. Cliff Mass, a professor of Atmospheric Sciences at the University of Washington, addressed the overall issue in a blog last year (in an entry called “Are California Coastal Wildfires Connected With Global Warming: The Evidence Says No”). Wrote the professor: “Those that are claiming the global warming is having an impact are doing so either out of ignorance or their wish to use coastal wildfires for their own purposes. For politicians, claiming that the big wildfires are the result of global warming provides a convenient excuse not to address the real problems.” He listed



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several, as quoted below:

- Irresponsible development of homes and buildings in natural areas that had a long history of wildfires.
- Many decades of fire suppression that have left some areas vulnerable to catastrophic fires.
- Lack of planning or maintenance of electrical infrastructure, making ignition of fires more probable when strong winds blow.
- Lack of attention to emergency management, or to providing sufficient fire fighting resources.
- Poor building codes, improper building materials (wood shake roofs), and lack of protective space around homes/buildings.

And as the professor acknowledged, “To be extremely cynical, some politicians on the left see the fires as a convenient partisan tool.”

The politicians and regulators ruling California no doubt hope that few will see the larger picture about how their restrictive edicts have limited controlled burning. According to the California Air Resources Board (CARB), these tight regulations are needed to protect air quality.

Not everybody has been fooled. There are even a few bright bulbs in the media, it turns out. For instance, Susan Shelley exposed the situation in the *Orange County Register* on November 15, pointing out that the governor had just given a press conference and “blamed climate change for the severity of the fires in California and declared that tens or hundreds of billions of dollars would be needed to address the problem.” The writer for the Southern California News Group then pointed to inconvenient facts:

One major wildfire can release more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere than all the state’s climate-change mitigation policies have managed to reduce in a year. So Californians get the worst of everything — the higher cost of energy from climate policies that tax oil and natural gas, plus the catastrophic fire damage, plus the greenhouse gas emissions and air-quality issues from the uncontrollable fires.

The technical name for these policies is “blithering idiocy.”

Some officials also are catching on. For example, U.S. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke has pointed the finger at “radical environmentalists” for stopping needed forest-management policies. As he noted about the recent events: “You have dead and dying timber. You have years of neglect. It was like a flamethrower of embers shooting through the forest.”

On November 20, Zinke reiterated his complaint, saying, “When [there is] lawsuit after lawsuit by, yes, the radical environmental groups that would rather burn down the entire forest than cut a single tree or thin the forest, then it’s easy to find who is suing and who promulgates these destructive policies.”

As the secretary put it: “Take a look at who’s suing — every time there’s a thinning project. The density of dead and dying trees is higher.” He went on: “When nature alone takes its course without management, there are consequences. The special-interest groups are really exercising their very tight agenda.”

Forest management has been contentious for many years. The *Wall Street Journal* offered an overview on November 13, noting that about 57 percent of California’s “forestland is owned by the federal



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government while most of the rest is private land regulated by the state. Nearly 130 million trees died in California between 2010 and 2017 due to drought and a bark beetle infestation. Dense forests put trees at greater risk for parasitic infection and enable fires to spread faster. When dead trees fall, they add more combustible fuel.”

There was once a time, the *Journal* recalled, when it was the mission of the U.S. Forest Service to manage the resources of the federal government actively. Yet, as the paper’s editors put it,

Numerous laws over the last 50 years, including the Endangered Species Act and National Environmental Policy Act, have hampered tree-clearing, controlled burns and timber sales on federal land.

California also restricts timber harvesting and requires myriad permits and environmental-impact statements to prune overgrown forests. As the state Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) dryly noted in April, “project proponents seeking to conduct activities to improve the health of California’s forests indicate that in some cases, state regulatory requirements can be excessively duplicative, lengthy, and costly.”

The federal government also has lent many unhelping hands over the years. One example, not specified by the *Journal*, was the Clinton administration’s plan in the 1990s to limit logging in order to protect old-growth trees and spotted owls.

More recently, initiatives by the Interior Department and Forest Service that would have helped revise policies under direct federal control have been opposed by judges, green-leaning elected politicians, and unelected bureaucrats.

Because of the increased risk, Secretary Zinke and Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue have been asking Congress for more authority when it comes to streamlining the removal of trees in overgrown forests. But not surprisingly, there is enviro-resistance to that.

Some groups have accused the Trump administration, as the *Wall Street Journal* reported, “of using the Camp Fire tragedy to further an agenda of helping big timber companies. ‘This is not thinning they’re talking about. This is intensive commercial logging,’ said Chad Hanson, research ecologist with the John Muir Project.”

Nonetheless, of late there have been intimations that some longtime opponents may seek common ground. For instance, at least a few in the professional environmental coterie now say they see the need of limited logging to decrease the risk of wildfires. How much “thinning” that really means on the ground, and how long any agreements with the timber industry might last, remains to be seen. After all, these battle lines have been drawn for a long time.

In a recent column, Paul Driessen recalled how Governor Brown in 2016

vetoed a bipartisan wildfire management bill that had unanimously passed the state Assembly and Senate. For decades, radical environmentalists have demanded — and legislators, regulators and judges have approved — “wildlands preservation” and “fires are natural” policies. Tree thinning has been banned, resulting in thousands of skinny, fire-susceptible trees growing where only a few hundred should be present. Even removing diseased, dead and burned trees has been prohibited.

Welcome, in the words of Jerry Brown, to “the new abnormal.” His Democrat successor, Governor-elect Gavin Newsom, has spent a couple of years attacking the president and trading pointed tweets with



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Trump; he has also promised to follow in Brown's footsteps in battling "climate change."

We will see how all this plays out in practice. Until proven otherwise, the new abnormal looks a lot like the old one.

— William P. Hoar

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