



Forestry Regulations Ignite More California Wildfires

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Misguided green policies are turning vast Northwestern national parklands black with dense smoke and charred forests. Nevertheless, Al Gore wasted no opportunity to blame the tragic losses of lives and properties on global warming.

Addressing a Las Vegas crowd at a National Clean Energy Conference, he claimed, "All over the West we're seeing these fires get much, much worse . . . the underlying cause is the heat . . . The heart of this is that we still depend on fossil fuels."

While no one should dismiss the devastating losses of lives and property caused by Northern California wildfires, such events cannot realistically be attributed to any recent climate change. Back in 1910, 3,000 separate wildfires merged into a single monstrous inferno which caused 92 fatalities and destroyed 3 million acres in Washington, Idaho, and Montana.

More forest acreage burned in the 1930s than during any time since then. A Tillamook burn alone ravaged 554 square miles in Oregon in 1933. The year 2000, the worst since the 1950s, destroyed 8.4 million acres with recovery costs totaling an estimated \$3 billion.

It is fair to note that an average 162,276 acres which burned annually between 1960 and 1984 as reported by the National Interagency Fire Center then jumped to an average 670,018 acres between 1985 and 1998. Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Calif., who chairs the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands, attributes great influence upon this trend to poor land management resulting from misguided environmental policies which have made eternally dangerous conditions worse.

Referring particularly to the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered Species Act, McClintock asks, "Well, after 45 years of experience with these environmental laws — all passed with the promise that they would improve our forest environment — I think we are entitled to ask, 'How's the forest environment doing?'"

He then responds, "All around us, the answer is damning. These laws have not only failed to improve our forest environment, but they are literally killing our forests."

McClintock has repeatedly emphasized that national forests have proven to be far more susceptible to uncontrollable conflagrations than those leased or owned by timber companies which responsibly clear the most vulnerably stressed wood.

McClintock observes, "Time and again we see vivid boundaries between young, healthy, growing forests managed by state, local, and private landholders, and the choked, dying, or burned federal forests."

Meanwhile, as costs and delays in obtaining regulatory permits drive away private logging companies, activist environmental lawsuits accompanying other legislative rules drain away National Forest Service budgets urgently needed for sensible forestry services.

Again, thanks in part to counterproductive obligations imposed by that same regulatory overreach, not all of that money is being spent wisely. Randal O'Toole, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute, reports that while Forest Services spending has risen steadily, much of that additional funding has been misused and ineffective.

O'Toole writes, "Fire expenditures have grown from less than 15 percent of the Forest Service budget in [the] early 1990s to about 50 percent today. Forest Service expenditures have increased from less than \$1 billion in the late 1990s to \$3.5 billion in 2016."

Many congressional Republicans favor legislative changes to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 which drives much of that failed federal conservation policy as a condition for helping to fix Forest Service budget problems. Likely financing agreement terms will attach prerequisite opportunities to increase logging on public land, and also to allow large fire-control clear-cuts in federal forests.

Sens. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and Kamala Harris, D-Calif., sent a letter to President Trump imploring him to first resolve the Forest Service money problem with a stand-alone funding measure . . . then deal later with broader disputes over forestry management separately.

White House budget director Mick Mulvaney appears to disagree with that separate non-conditional budgetary fix request. He wrote to congressional leaders, "Active forest management and other reforms must be part of the solution to curb the cost and destruction of wildfires."

Members of the Western Caucus have proposed legislation to dramatically change the way forests are managed. If passed, this bill would give power back to local authorities and allow for more aggressive forest thinning without subjecting them to the most onerous of environmental reviews.

Apparently favoring this priority, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke stated, "It is well settled that the steady accumulation and thickening of vegetation in areas that have historically burned at frequent intervals exacerbates fuel conditions and often leads to larger and higher-intensity fires." Accordingly, he has ordered all land managers and park superintendents to be more aggressive in cutting down small trees and underbrush to prevent Western wildfires.

So here's still another proposal. While clearing that brush in Washington State, let's also thin some bureaucratic dead wood out of the swamp we're draining in Washington, D.C.