

The Pueblo Chieftain

Wildfires: It didn't have to be this way

Dave Van Manen

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I wake up to another day of smoky haze, another day of no rain, another day of sweltering heat.

As I write these words, active fires are burning on over 175,000 acres of Colorado, and nearly 1.5 million acres of California are on fire. These fires are the source of the smoke that is obscuring the view of the ridgeline just outside my window.

I write from my small old cabin tucked into a few acres of mitigated forest of ponderosa pine and Gambel oak in Colorado's bone-dry southern foothills. My house is partially packed-up with essentials, ready to go in case we get the word that a wildfire threatens.

This all begs the question, Is this heat, this drought, these wildfires the result of climate change?

We've always had wildfires, droughts, and heat waves. What makes this different? Yes, this is different. Despite decades of climate change denial by the fossil fuel industry, the science is clear and solid – human-caused climate change is real, and it is a significant factor in why our skies are full of smoke.

The National Academy of Sciences stated in 2016 that “human-caused climate change caused over half of the documented increases in fuel aridity since the 1970s and doubled the cumulative forest fire area since 1984.”

Ken Pimlott, retired director of California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection with 30 years of experience fighting wildland fires, pulls no punches: “If you don't think the climate is changing, you haven't been on the frontlines.”

Yes, wildfires have always happened, but there is no question that wildfires are bigger than they used to be, and the fire season is longer than it used to be. And there is no question that the reason for these increases is a changed climate.

It did not have to be this way. Scientists have known for several decades that what is happening to our climate and to our forests would happen if we didn't make significant reductions in greenhouse-gas emissions from fossil fuel consumption.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated in 1990 in its First Assessment Report, “We are certain of the following: ... Emissions resulting from human activities are substantially increasing the atmospheric concentrations of the greenhouse gases. These increases

will enhance the greenhouse effect, resulting on average in an additional warming of the Earth's surface.”

The same report went on to say that “losses from wildfire will be increasingly extensive.”

The science clearly connects atmospheric CO2 levels with global temperature – the more CO2 in the atmosphere, the higher the global temperature.

Prior to the start of the Industrial Revolution, global CO2 levels were at around 280 parts per million (ppm). When that first IPCC Report was released, CO2 levels were at 350ppm. Today they are 412ppm. That is the highest CO2 level in at least 800,000 years. Our own species Homo sapiens arrived on the planet around 195,000 years ago, so we as a species have never experienced CO2 levels this high.

Those that profit financially from the perpetuation of burning fossil fuels, and the politicians they support, continue to deny the climate crisis. As Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe put it, “Man-made global warming is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people.” Their denial, much of it spread by industry-funded front groups such as the Heartland Institute, Cato Institute, and the Heritage Foundation, is why our wildfires are bigger, our air is smokier, and why droughts and heat waves are getting worse. Leave it to them, and they seem perfectly content getting richer while the planet cooks, the forests burn, and the climate unravels.

With the elections just around the bend, please do your homework and find out candidates' views on climate change. And not just the presidential race. Find out the views of those running for federal and state Senate and House seats, for County Commissioner and City Council, and even those running for School Board.

Our future, and especially the future of our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, needs leaders who believe in science and are willing to take on the fossil fuel industry and make the necessary choices that aggressively address climate change. Please vote with the knowledge that, as Greta Thunberg put it, “Our house is on fire.”

Because it is!