



Dispatch from an evacuee

other views

Dominick A. DellaSala As I write this piece, my town of Talent is a disaster area with homes and businesses burned to the ground in the Alameda Fire. I am angry that all of this could have been avoided with proper urban planning instead of logging in the backcountry proposed by the timber industry and 'forestry collaboratives' in Oregon. As a climate change and forest scientist, I also am responding to the misinformed viewpoint of Wes Melo (Guest View, Aug. 25) that legislators need to simply do away with environmental protections so that we can log even more.

Community safety has nothing to do with backcountry logging or too many environmental protections and everything to do with proper urban planning and forestry reforms. This means planning escape routes, home hardening and defensible space, smoke and escape shelters for every single community in fire-prone areas. Local planners need to have escape routes ready to go on a moment's notice with a central warning system accessible to all residents. New development and insurance companies alike should avoid building in fire-prone areas.

None of this pre-planning was operational in the Alameda Fire, as evacuees took hours to reach safety held up in traffic jams with few escape routes and hardly any real-time emergency response direction, as responders were understandably overwhelmed and grossly underfunded.

No amount of logging will aid communities in a rapidly changing climate that is priming the fire pump.

Consider this: Wildfire activity follows drought cycles and global-regional temperature spikes that dictate extreme fire-weather conditions that no thinning project can stop. The Pacific Coast has been in excessive drought since March, aided by unprecedented summer temperatures. This created the dangerous urban-wildfire disaster we now face and have been repeatedly warned about because of a rapidly changing climate.

In 2017, 1,300 wildfires in the interior of British Columbia spread rapidly during extreme summer heat. Strong winds sent smoke billowing into the southeasterly flow of the Jetstream, eventually settling in Oregon. This year, fires in treeless Siberia poured smoke into the Jetstream, as, for the first time in recorded history, Siberia experienced triple-digit temperatures and Oregon got the smoke. In Southern California, wildfires broke out during an unprecedented heat wave with temperatures soaring past 120 degrees, spinning off rare pyro-tornadoes and sending smoke into nearby states. Escaped campfires, accidental sparks and 'gender-reveal' parties also contributed.

Meanwhile, the climate of Oregon becomes increasingly like that of Redding. So, unless we also overhaul forestry policies to be climate- and people-safe, we are headed for more urban disasters.

Retraining timber managers in law enforcement to monitor and close recreation use in extreme fire weather would prevent unwanted ignitions along with closing and obliterating roads for public and fire safety concerns. Nationwide, some 80% of all fires are human caused; about half of them in our region are caused by people.

Getting the facts right is also important to forestry reform. Based on the most comprehensive study ever conducted of 1,500 forest fires over a four-decade period across the West, forests with the most logging burned in the severest fires. This also was shown for a large fire near Roseburg in 2013 that raced through densely packed tree plantations under extreme fire weather.

Instead of logging them, forests should be managed to contribute to climate safety. This means protecting older forests that have absorbed centuries of atmospheric carbon while allowing logged-over areas decades to recover. For instance, the landmark Northwest Forest Plan reversed the dangerous trend of global warming pollution from excessive logging in the 1980s to public forests now acting as vast repositories of carbon. By comparison, logging, mostly on private lands, emits up to 10 times more carbon than even the largest wildfires.

By most accounts, scientists give us but a decade to greatly cut global warming pollution before all hell breaks loose.

As an evacuee, it's only natural for me to feel anger at urban-wildfire disasters that could have been avoided with proper planning and forestry reforms in a region that is increasingly feeling the pain of climate chaos and failed planning.

Our elected officials are supposed to make us safer, not support misdirected logging projects. Real reform beings with community safety first and foremost and long-term planning to avoid climate chaos and future urban disasters.

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