



NEWS



News Headlines 09/25/2020

- Saturday conversation: What is the cause of the wildfires in the West?

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Posted: September 25, 2020 at 4:14PM



Jesse Vasquez, of the **San Bernardino County Fire Department**, hoses down hot spots from the Bobcat Fire on Sept. 19, in Valyermo, Cali.
Marcio Jose Sanchez/The Associated Press

Wildfires prove there is no time for delay in rejecting fossil fuels

By Hannah Sohl

In southern Oregon, we have been living with the effects of climate change for years.

Our summers are hotter, drier and increasingly smoky due to wildfires. Smoke has shut down performances at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and endangered the health of outdoor workers, while our rivers bloom with toxic algae.

But nothing makes you feel the effect of climate change bone deep like watching your community turn to ash.

I'm the executive director of Rogue Climate and a lifelong resident of the Rogue Valley in southern Oregon. After fleeing our homes with our friends and families while entire communities went up in flames Sept. 8, my colleagues and I can say with authority that the climate crisis is here today, and it's a direct threat to public health and safety.

Our office in Phoenix, Oregon, burned to the ground.

Our region is not a stranger to wildfire, which is a natural part of the forest ecosystem, and fire has been used by indigenous communities to care for the forests for millennia. But climate change is changing how fire operates in the West.

These wildfires were a perfect storm: dry forests and strong easterly winds that pushed fires from forested areas into populated towns. Thousands of people had to evacuate their homes, setting aside concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic to stay with friends or at shelters.

When it was all said and done, the fire destroyed much of the small towns of Talent and Phoenix, and burned into Medford. More than 1,700 homes and businesses burned.

So what can we learn from this unprecedented climate-driven catastrophe? A lot, it turns out.

Climate solutions improve lives now

As winds picked up, electric utilities were forced to turn off the power in Talent to avoid sparking more fires.

Our organization, along with others, set up mobile charging stations where displaced families could charge electronics, enabling them to let frightened friends and family know that they were safe.

Now our team is collecting and distributing emergency supplies — water, tents, N95 masks and more — to people who lost everything to the fires.

In a world of more extreme weather, locally owned, resilient power systems driven by clean energy will be key to picking up the pieces after a disaster. Homes and community centers with rooftop solar and batteries don't have to wait for power lines to be repaired. Talent has a commitment to reach 100% clean energy by 2030 and has one of the most aggressive clean energy action plans in the state.

These kinds of clean energy efforts help accelerate the transition away from the fossil fuel projects that heat the atmosphere, like the massive proposed Jordan Cove liquefied natural gas export terminal that would cut an explosive pipeline through Oregon.

Everyone deserves clean air

Those who didn't lose homes have still been forced to live with choking wildfire smoke that poses an immense risk to peoples' respiratory health.

Much of the West Coast has registered unhealthy or hazardous air quality for more than a week, forcing people to stay indoors. Scientists say prolonged exposure to wildfire smoke can lead to decreased lung function, higher rates of respiratory problems and potentially more deaths in patients battling COVID-19.

Eventually, Pacific Ocean winds will clear the smoke, and a combination of autumn rains and the round-the-clock work of brave local firefighters will put out the fires.

But many communities across the country don't get to take a break from living with unhealthy air. Industrial factories, power plants and freeways disproportionately pollute neighborhoods with large populations of Black, indigenous and other people of color.

Here in southern Oregon, large proportions of Latinx workers have outdoor jobs in agriculture, construction or forestry, where they are exposed to toxins daily and can't afford to take a day off when air quality gets hazardous. Our temporary air quality nightmare is the day-to-day reality for many of our neighbors.

While climate change is clearly here now, there are still better and worse possible futures — and which future we will get depends on what we do today. For decades, corporate special interests have been able to block urgent climate action despite scientists' warnings.

These fires underscore that we simply can't let that happen any longer. So as we show up to support our community and rebuild, we have to start implementing large-scale solutions now.

It is a matter of justice. It is a matter of survival.

Man-made policies, not man-made climate change, are fueling wildfires

By Myron Ebell

The catastrophic wildfires raging up and down the West Coast should force a radical reversal of 30 years of disastrous government policies.

Instead, the politicians and environmental pressure groups who gave us these policies are using climate change as a smokescreen to avoid blame and to prevent the change of direction in management needed to restore health to our forests and thereby reduce fire risks.

We might be able to forgive those who, like Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden, know nothing about what they are talking about when they blame the fires on climate change.

It is enough to point out that the big fires are occurring almost exclusively on public land — national forests, Bureau of Land Management forests and rangelands, and state forests — and not on privately owned forests.

But the Sierra Club, founded by John Muir in 1892 to protect Yosemite National Park and other wonders in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains, should know better. The Sierra Club has led the campaign to end active management of our public lands and since 1996 has officially opposed commercial logging in all national forests.

Yet here is a statement published on Aug. 27 by the Sierra Club's executive director, Michael Brune: "If any good can come from this fire season, let it be that it serves as a wake-up call for our politicians. We must end the cycle of putting fossil fuel interests before public health and safety — right here, and right now. ... California can set the standard for environmental policies across the country. If we sharply reduce emissions, we show the rest of the US what's possible."

While Congress has not legally banned commercial logging, Sierra Club allies like Reps. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., and Jared Huffman, D-Calif., who represent two of the districts hardest hit by this year's fires, have successfully pushed for management changes that come pretty close to a ban.

Timber production from national forests averaged 12 billion board feet per year in the 1980s. As a result of the "timber wars," which most notably included listing of the spotted owl as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in 1990, timber production declined precipitously through the 1990s and has averaged between 2 and 3 billion board feet since 2000.

The Trump administration, to its credit, has tried to increase the cut to at least 4 billion board feet in the face of fierce opposition from Congress and the environmental movement.

Cutting 2 billion board feet of timber a year while growing trees add between 14 and 17 billion board feet a year in total forest volume has inevitably led to massive fuel buildup. And massive fuel buildup inevitably leads to disease and insect infestation and eventually to catastrophic fires.

Bill Dennison, former president of California Forestry Association, is one of the many professional foresters who warned in the early 1990s of the consequences of closing the national forests to logging.

But you don't need to be a professional forester to see that those warnings have come true. Anyone driving through forests in the Sierra Nevada, the Cascade Mountains, or the Coast Range can see the destruction.

Tens of millions of dead trees as a result of bark beetle infestations. Endless thickets of unhealthy small trees where there should be mighty stands of Douglas fir or ponderosa pine. And huge areas — more and bigger every year — that have been incinerated by fire, leaving nothing but blackened trunks and wildlife carcasses.

In the face of this environmental and economic catastrophe, there have been calls for modest reforms.

Some advocate more prescribed burns. Others promote more programs to thin overgrown thickets. There is even a bill in Congress to allow salvage logging without the environmental reviews (followed by lawsuits) that now last so long that the dead or burned timber has decayed so much that it is worthless before salvage begins.

But these reforms are mere Band-Aids when a heart transplant is the only thing that will save the patient. If we are going to save our public forests and reduce the risk of catastrophic fires, a healthy timber industry must be restored.

It won't be easy. Overcoming intense opposition to logging is only the first step.

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