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A wildfire burns near residential structures in Devore Calif on Aug 17, 2016. David Pardo, The Daily Press

Forever war' with fire has California battling forests

Brian Sullivan and Mark Chediak Bloomberg News

Acre by acre, tree by tree, branch by gnarly branch, a handful of 12-person crews, armed with little more than chainsaws and axes, is attempting to thin out the California forest. It is a Sisyphean task. The state is home to some 33 million acres of woodland. An efficient crew, working with hand tools under ideal conditions, can get through a quarter of an acre a day, give or take. And yet, after a succession of horrific, record-setting wildfire seasons, this is where the state now finds itself: So desperate to stem the tide and contain the losses — of both lives and property — that it's plunking down more than \$500 million this fiscal year alone for an effort that includes clearing pines, firs and redwoods. Without all this fuel on the forest floor, California officials contend, blazes will be less likely to turn into the mega-fires that devour thousands of acres. Dousing them once they erupt can't be the lone strategy in a state already scarred by global warming, they say.

The question is whether this new push can be done at a pace and scale that'll actually make a difference. In a best-case scenario, Gov. Gavin Newsom hopes state and federal crews will be thinning out one million acres annually by 2025. He's asking the state legislature to give him \$2 billion to accelerate efforts in the fiscal year starting July 1. But even if his goal is achieved, it'd still leave millions of acres, and the communities that surround them, vulnerable for decades. And with temperatures soaring and drought conditions worsening across the state, it's only a matter of time, scientists say, before the first of the big blazes of 2021 break out.

Global power grids pushed to limit by hot weather, rising demand

Though California's plan to thin woodland is a costly one, it's necessary to break the cycle of devastating blazes, according to Michael Wara, director of the Climate and Energy Policy Program at Stanford University.

Simply fighting fires as they start is "a forever war," he said. "You don't win those. The solution is to change your strategy and really rethink what you are doing."

It's an approach not dissimilar to the one then-President Donald Trump proposed in 2018, when he said California should follow Finland's lead and spend more time "raking" the forest floor to prevent blazes — a suggestion that promptly became fodder for memes and late-night television jokes.

What Trump didn't mention is that the U.S. government owns about 58% of the state's land. As part of the new plan, state and federal government are joining forces. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, known as Cal Fire, is supplementing its own crews with outside organizations like the National Guard and the California Conservation Corps, a state department that puts young adults to work on environmental projects. The push to thin California's forests is a race against time. Climate change has left the U.S. West hotter and drier, creating prime conditions for blazes. Last year, wildfires in California killed 33 people and charred a record 4.3 million acres, an area larger than Connecticut. Heading into peak fire season in the summer and fall, the entire state of California is gripped by drought conditions.

Fire season in the West is running about a month ahead of schedule, with conditions normally seen in July emerging now because of the drought, according to U.S. government forecasters. Blazes will likely be more severe across the region this year, said Gina Palma, a fire meteorologist with the Department of Agriculture.

Drought is the U.S. West's next big climate disaster

After years of mismanagement, many California forest lands are overcrowded stands of thirsty trees susceptible to insect infestation and disease. Suburban sprawl is reaching further into wooded areas in the most populous U.S. state, increasing the risk of wildfire fatalities. Last year, wildfires across California and the West cost the U.S. \$16.5 billion, according to the U.S. National Centers for Environmental Information.

The task of forest-clearing is a perilous one, said Alex Makela, one of a dozen-member crew from the Conservation Corps. On a typical day, Makela and his fellow workers hike into a tangled thicket of branches, lugging everything they need — chainsaws, gasoline, food, rain gear and a medical kit — on their backs while they wipe sweaty brows and swat at mosquitoes.

Crew members must be vigilant to stay out of the path of falling trees. In some areas, with debris piled as high as four feet deep, woodchippers and controlled burns are required. "Lack of awareness is most dangerous," said Makela, who slipped and cracked a rib a few weeks back.

Because the goal of clearing 1 million acres is part of a joint project between California and the U.S. government, the state will only have to target 500,000 acres per year, said Christine McMorrow, a Cal Fire spokeswoman.

Clearing done by private landowners, community groups and timber harvests may be counted toward that target, she said. The forest management approach won't supplant the long-term strategy of attacking every fire over 10 acres in size.

While not all of California's 101 million acres are wildlands, state fire officials admit that meeting the millionaire-per-year goal will be a daunting, never-ending process.

"As soon as you cut it down, it starts to regrow," said Steve Hawks, manager of the wildfire planning and engineering division at Cal Fire, which has firefighting responsibility for 31 million acres. "It is going to be a constant thing."

Still, it's a good investment, according to Robert Bailey, director of climate resilience at risk management and consulting firm Marsh McLennan. Governments fall into a "firefighting trap," spending their money each year on putting out fires and leaving little for clearing deadwood and debris, Bailey said.

“You get caught in this spiral of increasing costs and increasing fires,” he said. “The governments have to break out of this spiral by doing more preventative measures.”

Views on forest management have shifted over time. In the U.S., forests were seen as a source of cheap building materials during the housing boom following World War II, then as a source of recreation in the decades that followed, leading to a strategy of aggressive firefighting.

Some environmental groups support forest clearing in certain areas, while others have expressed opposition. The Natural Conservancy in California “has been and is very much involved in increasing efforts to reduce the risk of megafires through ecological thinning and controlled burns, particularly in the fire-eater forests of the Sierra Nevada” mountain range along the state’s eastern edge, according to spokesman Juvenio Guerra.

But Bryant Baker, conservation director for Los Padres ForestWatch, said controlled burns in Southern California’s national forests threaten native plant areas.

“There are issues with just assuming this is some sort silver bullet in changing overall fires in the state,” Baker said. “Prescribed fire is not going to be the thing that stops very large wind-driven fires that are occurring.”

A century-long ban on burning by Native American groups, some of which had a tradition of thinning forest, has made woodlands even more susceptible to uncontrolled fires, Amy Cordalis, general counsel for California’s Yurok Tribe, said last month at a hearing before Congress.

“We are facing an extremely elevated forest fire risk due to the drought and to the 100-year-long ban on cultural burning, which has led to a massive buildup of exceedingly flammable fuels,” Cordalis said. Other indigenous groups, however, have opposed government proposals to thin California forest land.

The human toll of wildfires has been vast, with the blazes killing more than 100 people in California over the past five years and upending the lives of millions more.

Residents of the state have endured blackouts as utilities periodically cut power in an attempt to prevent their equipment from sparking flames.

In 2019, San Francisco utility giant PG&E Corp. was pushed into bankruptcy after it was found responsible for several large fires. Wildfires have also decimated air quality, spreading acrid, choking smoke throughout the state.

The fires are only getting worse.

Five of the state’s largest-ever blazes seared California last year, and 10 of the most expensive have happened since 2003, according to Cal Fire. The price tag for fire suppression surpassed \$100 million for the first time in the 1990s. In the 2020 to 2021 season, costs are estimated to have topped \$1 billion for the first time, according to Cal Fire.

Although it’s started off slowly so far, this fire season is expected to be an active one in the West, according to the National Interagency Fire Center. More than 88% of an area that includes 11 western states is under drought conditions, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

“The trend is pretty clear — the wildfire problem is not what it was 15 years ago,” said Lou Gritzo, vice president and manager of research at commercial insurer FM Global. “The fires are getting bigger.”

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