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GUEST VIEW:

## Forests and fires: a path forward

BY TIM PALMER

Fires raging this autumn in California have reminded us of the increasing danger from wildfire and its aftermath in the age of climate change. Reflecting on those tragedies, people wonder what can be done.

With losses so recent, this is not the time for blame, though our president — with no factual basis or grounding — tweeted right away on Nov. 10, “There’s no reason for these massive, deadly and costly forest fires in California except that forest management is so poor....remedy now, or no more Federal payments.”

In fact, the fires he referred to were not in forests subject to federal control but rather on private land and in brushy chaparral. Yet the greater disconnect here owes to people who likely advise the president with widespread but misleading arguments that forests must be cut to prevent them — and our communities — from burning.

So, what can we do to diminish the threat of fires? And how can people from all walks of life come together for solutions that make sense to all?

First, protect our houses with fire-resisting measures and create defensible space around them. This won’t stop the fires, and it won’t guarantee escape from damage, but good results are proven, and experts agree that this is the single most effective and affordable option to reduce losses. How-to-do-it tips are easily found.

Second, thick young forests growing in the wake of clearcuts that have characterized commercial logging for the past century burn the hottest, and thinning those stands can help when it’s done as buffers at the edge of communities, rural neighborhoods, and roads strategically selected as fire breaks.

Next, we must protect from logging the mature forests that remain. These are where fires cool owing to old trees’ thick bark that’s fire-resistant, to large trees’ long boles that shed low limbs otherwise providing a ladder for flames to climb high, and to big trees’ shade that keeps the ground cooler and less filled with brush and young trees that are explosively flammable. Old forests are not immune to fire, but in all but extreme conditions they are less likely to burn intensely (see *Ecosphere*, Oct. 26, 2016, by Bradley, Hanson and DellaSala). Likewise, we must restore many of our cutover forests to mature and less ignitable conditions where possible.

Onward, our local governments need to recognize fire hazard as a public issue because fires are endangering public investments, firefighters, and established residents and communities. At a minimum, areas most prone to fire should be identified and prospective home builders warned about investing and living in harm’s way. Ordinances should require protective measures for new development. Further, planning programs need to favor and facilitate development within established

communities and discourage it in outlying woodlands. Safe havens in built-up areas are certainly not assured, but defense is far more likely than with development scattered in remote and vulnerable fire zones.

Finally, we all need to recognize that the principle cause of intensifying fires is climate change. Worsening wildfires are inevitable owing to warming temperatures, increasing drought and hot winds. Together these create blazes overcoming any defenses we can muster and any type of forestry prescription one might imagine. The problem will grow until we reverse the trend of global warming. The principal means of doing that is to move beyond a fossil-fuel economy and toward renewable energy sources.

There's no silver bullet, but it's time to work together for long-term solutions that put vested interests aside and engage in the future with new commitments, new determination and new responsibilities to meet the challenges of a changing world.

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