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Inmates should clear California forests to prevent fire

REESE HALTER • SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN • AUGUST 21, 2008

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This year, California has smashed two frightening records: The driest year so far recorded and the worst fire season to scorch parched forests since the inception of continuous records in 1871.

ADVERTISEMENT Since July 1, the state has spent more than \$295 million fighting fires. That figure does not include millions of dollars spent battling more than 1,000 fires ignited from more than 5,000 dry-lightning strikes on June 21 and 22. Moreover, our tinder-dry state has yet to experience the predictable and ferocious Santa Ana winds of September and October.

Already this year, 306 homes were incinerated and over 1.4 million acres are charred, eclipsing the 1936 record of 756,696 acres burned in a year.

As climate change deepens, prolonged periods of droughts are occurring. For California specifically, the onset of the La Niña or the cooling of the eastern Pacific Ocean has caused the jet stream to migrate northward, preventing snow from falling on the Sierra Nevada, particularly in mid-February and March. In turn, warmer than average springtime air temperatures evaporated at least 30 percent of the Sierra Nevada snowpack, which accounts for the bulk of California's annual water supply.

The snowpack is also important because it acts like an enormous sponge — releasing water slowly into the soil, feeding state reservoirs and keeping forests from drying out and becoming powder kegs.

For the past 85 years or so, jurisdictions across the West and including California have imposed a Smokey Bear fire policy, interrupting the natural fire cycle and deliberately preventing all wildfires.

Forest ecosystems, like humans, continuously undergo change. Fire is one of nature's agents of change. By purposely stopping fire from occurring, resource managers have altered the structure and composition of our forests.

In California, hundreds of millions of highly flammable incense cedars and white fir seedlings and saplings are now carpeting the forest floors. Lightning-induced fire every other decade or so would normally preclude dense overcrowding, but outdated management policies have upset nature's balance.

Droughts across the West and California have weakened a billion mature pine trees. Those pines that have not died from water starvation lack gooey pitch — their only defense mechanism against native bark beetles.

Bark beetles are another of nature's agents of change; they are on a tear. Since fire has been suppressed from the landscape, and lethal frigid temperatures in November have not occurred for the last decade, billions of bark beetles are swarming in a feeding frenzy of biblical proportions. Millions of dead standing pines in California are acting as kindling and fueling megafires like those of 2003, 2007 and 2008.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is considering a new tax — \$1 a month for every homeowner, but even this is unlikely to scratch the surface of escalating firefighting costs.

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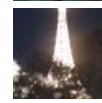


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Unusual times call for unusual actions and Gov. Schwarzenegger would be well advised to consider following a precedent that New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson implemented successfully to remove millions of dead pinyon pines in New Mexico on both state and federal lands. Richardson mobilized prison inmates to clear the incendiary dead trees.

The costs of having inmates assist in removal of dead trees as well as thinning-out overcrowded forests state-wide is a fraction of the cost of the other options, including raising new taxes and the labor cost for having foresters thin the forest, hundreds of millions of dollars spent fighting wildfires, or the cost of replacing homes destroyed by fires.

Reese Halter is a public speaker and founder of the international conservation institute Global Forest Science. Contact him at www.DrReese.com.



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zigzag wrote:

Inmates should be in the legislature replacing the clowns that are there now.

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LanceWinslow wrote:

When the underbrush is over 100 tons per acre, the fire damage risk to the old growth is too great because the big fires get too hot. So, either they have to let some of the little fires burn themselves out, or yes they are going to have to clear the underbrush. Using inmates makes sense in this case. Right now entire battalions of inmates go and fight fires, using them for clearing brush is wise, especially considering the 100s of millions spent on this last set of Northern Cal fires. Definitely worthy of consideration. Thanks Reese.

8/21/2008 1:02:26 PM

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