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The long dry run

by Dr. Reese Halter

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ANGELES NATIONAL FOREST — As firefighters battle to bring the gigantic Station fire and others under control, Los Angelenos are left to wonder what the state can do to protect homeowners from the next hellacious conflagration.

Our ancient forests in California are living museums, rich with detailed records from the past. All the vegetation in Southern California has evolved and adapted to the regular occurrence of lightning-induced fire.

What we are finding out is just how dry California has been over the past 45 centuries. Tree rings from bristlecone pines living at 11,000 feet above sea-level on the White Mountains of east-central California show the climate over the past four millennia. In fact, California has just experienced the third- or fourth-wettest century in the past 4,000 years.

This finding is of great concern considering the bone-dry conditions enveloping the chaparral and pine forests of Southern California, especially because we are in the worst drought in modern times.

Where does California get its water? About 90 percent of the fresh water in our state — which is the eighth mightiest economy and the most intensive agriculture system in the world — comes from the slow spring-time melt of the snowpack that accumulates each year across the 400-mile long Sierra Nevada's. The mighty Colorado River also feeds water to Southern California and in particular Los Angeles and San Diego.

This past winter the snowpack was about 61 percent of its average depth in the Sierras. The state will deliver just 15 percent of its water contracts — short changing farmers by billions of dollars — because of low reservoir levels, starving the threatened fish of the Sacramento and San Joaquin deltas.

Today, there are about 18 million people in Southern California. By 2020, that figure is expected to rise to 23 million. California's population by 2050 is predicted to exceed 55 million people — supplemented by millions of tourists each year.

Clearly, the lawmakers in Sacramento must secure more water from both the Friant Dam, north of Fresno, and the grasslands north of Sacramento.

I have been covering fires and their behavior in Southern California for the past 13 years including the firestorms of 2003 and 2007. Usually massive fires like the Station fire, which has charred over 132,000 acres, are driven by the inferno Santa Ana winds that pour fire from the mouths of canyons like crazed dragons. Not so this time. Although we've dogged the Santa Ana bullet — we are far from out of the woods.

The Station fire is the first fire I've ever seen of this magnitude being driven solely by drought. The fine fuels (leaves, twigs and bark) are the driest they've been in 25 years. The introduced grasses that are throughout the chaparral add extra kindling to this already volatile situation. And back-burning grasses on slopes usually results in mudslides.

So what, if anything, can be done to mitigate the fires in the Los Angeles basin given that there are hundreds of thousands of homes backed into the wildland interface?

Unusual times call for unusual actions: Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger would be well advised to consider following a precedent New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson implemented to remove millions of dead pinyon pines in his state and protect homeowners. Gov. Richardson mobilized prison inmates to clear the incendiary dead trees from forestlands.

Thousands of inmates in California already work on the fire-line and so exchanging chainsaws for brush-saws makes good sense. The cost of having inmates assist in removal of dead trees and brush, as well as thinning out the white fir and incense cedars throughout the mountains encircling the L.A. basin, is a fraction of the expense of the other options, including: raising new taxes, the labor bill for having foresters do the thinning, a billion dollars spent fighting wildfires in the last five years or the price tag for replacing homes destroyed by fires. And this doesn't consider human lives senselessly lost.

The choice for removing the explosive forest kindling is clear: Would you rather your tax dollars be spent paying \$1 an hour to inmates or \$30 an hour to professional fallers.

Dr. Reese Halter is a public speaker, conservation biologist and founder of the international conservation institute Global Forest Science. His latest book is "The Incomparable Honey Bee," Rocky Mountain Books.