

Opinion: Trump's continued climate denial and the fires of California

November 4 2019, by Steve Cohen

Last week I attended a corporate board meeting in California for the Willdan Group, a for-profit corporation largely devoted to the modernization of our energy system. The company is in the energy efficiency business and is one of many private firms demonstrating that it is possible to turn a profit while helping our country save money on energy and reduce greenhouse gases. As the meeting proceeded, I kept checking to see if the fires engulfing the state would make their way to LAX and keep me from returning home to New York. They didn't. California's ever-more experienced firefighters managed to contain the fires. But while I was in California, my Columbia University colleague Park Williams and a number of Earth Institute researchers were providing expert commentary to the media on the relationship of climate change to the fires of California. This summer, Park and a number of co-authors published an important article in the journal *Earth's Future*. In the piece titled "Observed Impacts of Anthropogenic Climate Change on Wildfire in California," Williams and colleagues found that:

"Since the early 1970s, California's annual wildfire extent increased fivefold, punctuated by extremely large and destructive wildfires in 2017 and 2018. This trend was mainly due to an eightfold increase in summertime forest-fire area and was very likely driven by drying of fuels promoted by human-induced warming. Warming effects were also apparent in the fall by enhancing the odds that fuels are dry when strong fall wind events occur. The ability of dry fuels to promote [large fires](#) is nonlinear, which has allowed warming to become increasingly impactful. Human-caused warming has already significantly enhanced wildfire

activity in California, particularly in the forests of the Sierra Nevada and North Coast, and will likely continue to do so in the coming decades."

An excellent article by Bill Chaisson on the Earth Institute's State of the Planet Blog provides additional scientific depth on this research. While scientists are connecting these fires to [climate change](#), the Trump administration seems to see climate science and [climate change policy](#) as a "liberal hoax." Reporting in the [New York Times](#) last weekend, Thomas Fuller and Coral Davenport wrote that:

"For the past three years, countries and companies around the world have looked to California as a counterweight to the Trump administration's aggressive dismantling of efforts to combat climate change. But this past week, as wildfires burned across the state—[fires that scientists say have been made worse by a changing climate](#)—and as at least five [large carmakers](#) sided with President Trump's plan to [roll back](#) California's climate pollution standards, the state's status as the vanguard of environmental policy seemed at the very least diminished. The state's leaders found themselves both witnessing firsthand the effects of climate change and hamstrung to take actions to fight it. "We're waging war against the most destructive fires in our state's history, and Trump is conducting a full-on assault against the antidote," Gov. Gavin Newsom of California said in an interview."

The White House's response to Governor Newsom was to urge California to drop its "liberal" climate policies and do a better job of forest management. New York City's beloved Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia once said that "there was no Democratic or Republican way to pick up the garbage." California's half-century effort to reduce air pollution is not a partisan issue in California. Its more recent struggle with understanding and combatting forest fires is similarly nonpartisan. The folks in Washington have fixated on the idea that California is neglecting forest management. That is nonsense. The issue is far more complex

than managing dry leaves and branches in the woods. There are many reasons for the increased damage caused by these fires. These include antiquated electric transmission lines, land use patterns that have brought more people living in and near forests, and a lack of policies that encourage and help people afford the cost of living in more densely settled cities. But clearly, climate change is also a key cause of the increased number, intensity and impact of forest fires.

It is beyond California's capacity to deal with this issue on its own. California is not the only place emitting greenhouse gasses. The state and its institutions are quickly adapting to the more fire-prone world they are living in. Pacific Gas and Electric, the state's power utility, has been shutting off power to reduce the risk of [fire](#) from electric sparks. As Erin Alworth reported recently in the Wall Street Journal, the state is also getting better at fighting fires due to their increased experience in combatting them. The state's forest firefighters are using new firefighting methods and technologies. According to Alworth:

"California has battled some of its biggest wildfires this year with a new weapon: a plane outfitted with infrared sensors that can see through smoke to plot the blazes' perimeters and transmit the coordinates to firefighters in real-time. The plane has mapped many of the major fires that have exploded in the past few weeks, including five in the greater Los Angeles area and the Kincade Fire in Sonoma County, north of San Francisco. By Saturday morning, the Maria Fire, which started Thursday night near Santa Paula in Ventura County, had spread to more than 9,400 acres and was 20% contained, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire. All other large fires monitored by Cal Fire were 70% or more contained... Cal Fire has logged more than 5,000 wildfires in the state so far this year, but none has caused mass casualties or massive damage like last year's Camp Fire, in which 85 people perished and the town of Paradise was destroyed."

But our grandmothers were right and "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." The underlying causes of increased fires and increased human impacts must be addressed. The impacts of climate change cannot be denied away, and a meaningful statewide land use policy needs to be developed to gently steer people away from forests and toward cities. The electrical system must be modernized with transmission lines that do not spark and lead to fires, and the system must be decentralized to avoid the massive dislocation caused by deliberate, centrally directed power system shut-downs.

It is easy to see climate impacts as someone else's problem until they become yours. This week it's fires in California. Next week it could be flooding in the Midwest. The following week it could be a hurricane moving up the Atlantic coast. No one is immune and there is really no place on earth to hide from the global threat of climate change.

The president sees California as a political enemy, and he is correct in believing that he has fewer and fewer friends there. The battle over impeachment and re-election is likely to make the extreme partisanship of the past several years even more extreme. We somehow need to return to those days when the large American consensus behind environmental protection found a voice in Washington. Richard Nixon was no environmentalist, but back in 1970 he still created the EPA and signed the Clean Air Act. Congressional override of his veto of the 1972 Federal Water Pollution Control Act certainly reminded him that clean water was beyond politics and partisanship. If we are to address [climate change](#), environmental protection must once again be seen as above politics and an unfit arena for partisan battle. Climate change is not a hoax or conspiracy but an established scientific fact. Our debate should be about how to mitigate and adapt to change, not about the reality of that change.

More information: A. Park Williams et al. Observed Impacts of

Anthropogenic Climate Change on Wildfire in California, *Earth's Future* (2019). [DOI: 10.1029/2019EF001210](https://doi.org/10.1029/2019EF001210)

This story is republished courtesy of Earth Institute, Columbia University
<http://blogs.ei.columbia.edu>.

Provided by Earth Institute, Columbia University

Citation: Opinion: Trump's continued climate denial and the fires of California (2019, November 4) retrieved 12 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-11-opinion-trump-climate-denial-california.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.