

Only who can prevent forest fires?

Dry brush was burning, and burning bigger, long before anybody heard of global warming or climate change

By Jason Hayes | June 2023

“The climate crisis was always real,” Jeff Goodell exclaimed this month in Rolling Stone Magazine. “Now it’s in your lungs.”

As eastern states suffer extended smoke plumes and degraded air quality from wildfires in Ontario and Quebec, wild claims like Goodell’s are filling the air. Every dry season brings headlines warning that extreme wildfires are here to stay.

That claim is narrowly true: Wildfires are here to stay, because wildfires have always been part of our history — and this year, and last year, and for many years prior, they have had more to do with poor forest management than with climate.

Blame for the smoke-filled air is falling on large wildfires in eastern Canada. But many fires are reported across the U.S., in Michigan, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, North Carolina, Nebraska, New Mexico, Arizona, Oregon, and Washington.

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One common response is to claim that climate change is supercharging wildfires. “The crisis adding fuel to the fire, quite literally, is climate change,” Rolling Stone concluded. Canadian Minister of Natural Resources Jonathan Wilkinson added to the foreboding tone

as he balefully predicted, “We are now experiencing a new reality.”

One new reality is that this month’s air quality troubles hit America’s media centers. Apocalyptic pictures of yellow-orange skies above New York City and

Washington, D.C., are filling the news. Air quality reports indicate hazardous conditions. Residents are being warned to avoid outside physical activity, and Air Quality Index scores as high as 413 were reported in Brooklyn on June 7.

Wildfire science confirms a basic fact: Dry weather tends to dry out materials that fuel and intensify wildfires. But climate change is not to blame for this year’s or any year’s wildfires.

“North American boreal forests burned much more 150 years ago than they do today,” three University of Quebec ecology professors concluded in a recent research paper. “[B]etween 1700 and 1850, the annual area burned was between two and more than 10 times greater than what has been observed over the past 40 years.” The scope of wildfires seems to have decreased despite any measured or predicted changes in climate (warming or other). In a weird twist, the same study then argues, “It seems more likely that climate change is the primary cause of the decrease in fires.”

More and more, ostensibly settled climate science aches to point out that there’s nothing climate change can’t do. Whether you’re worried about increasing or decreasing temperatures, increasing or decreasing precipitation, increasing or decreasing wildfires, climate change appears to have you covered.

Forest management policies play the key role in determining whether wildfires increase or decrease in number and intensity. Research by the Mackinac Center and other groups on forest management and wildfire policies in Michigan, Arizona, and North Carolina shows how a preservationist mindset has impacted forest health and wildfires. Competing demands over forested resources have made it nearly impossible for managers to manage the forest effectively while addressing demands that these areas be set aside and preserved.

These conflicts lead decision-makers to pause, effectively defaulting to non-management. As a result, ever-larger areas of dead and dying trees,

shrubs, and grasses in North American forests give wildfires the fuel they need to grow out of control.

We described these threats in *Extinguishing the Wildfire Threat*, co-published with Arizona’s Goldwater Institute. “Attempting to administer national forests as pristine wilderness—with little to no human activity apart from fire suppression—has allowed our public lands to become dangerously overgrown, overmature, and prone to disease, insect infestations, and fire.”

Still, there is reason to hope. Some government agencies are “recognizing the errors imposed by political environmentalism and preservationist mindsets,” as we noted in our 2023 study with the John Locke Foundation. These agencies are relearning how to manage forests for multiple uses, including harvesting, spacing, thinning, and prescribed fires. These strategies will reduce heavy fuel loads caused by built-up brush and dead and dying trees, promoting healthy, diverse forest ecologies.

Rather than blaming everything on the climate, policy makers and forest managers should return to basic forest management. Reducing heavy fuel loads in overgrown forests will do more to help control wildfire, and do so more quickly, than any policy to mitigate climate change.

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