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# There's a better, cheaper way to fight wildfires

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The rains have finally started, and Lane County avoided a major wildfire this year. We were fortunate. Wildfires burned throughout the West. The U.S. Forest Service and other agencies deployed massive resources to control and extinguish almost every wildfire. Leading scientists say this approach is wrong.

Wildfires have always been a natural and beneficial part of the forest landscape. They create wildlife habitat, help regenerate soils and increase a forest's resilience.

This year, more than 11 million acres burned, making it one of the largest wildfire years in recorded history. The Forest Service alone spent a record \$200 million a week battling wildfires. State agencies, Native American tribes and others spent millions as well.

The extensive wildfires occurred because this year's heat reduced mid-elevation snowpack and increased evaporation. In addition, most of the West experienced significant drought. Combined with high winds, these factors made some forests — especially those with high fuel loads resulting from decades of fire suppression — more susceptible to fire.

Today, 98 percent of wildfires are contained before reaching 300 acres. This is extremely costly. Scientists also say this approach allows fuels to build up in forests, making more severe fires possible. Further, it undermines the ecological diversity and health of forests.

Just as important, methods exist to minimize the number of severe fires and increase forest resilience. Yet the Forest Service and other agencies continue to react as they have in the past.

One reason is the public's erroneous but potent negative perception of wildfires. Communities located near forests demand that fires be rapidly extinguished to protect property and reduce smoke intrusion. The timber industry pressures agencies to keep fires on public lands from spreading to their holdings, and to protect timber on federal lands from fire so they can harvest it. And the Forest Service's budget provides a perverse incentive for the agency to continue to spend more and more on fire suppression as a way to support its funding.

Three scientists with expertise in forest and carbon management recently spoke on a panel about more ecologically sound and cost-effective ways to respond to wildfires. Dr. Beverly Law from Oregon State University, Dr. Matthew Hurteau from the University of New Mexico, and Dr. Malcolm North from the U.S. Forest Service Pacific Southwest Research Station and the University of California Davis all said that rapidly putting out all fires is a mistake.

The scientists said that contrary to common belief, the Northwest is not outside the historic range in the total number of fires, acres burned or fire severity. Some years see more wildfires, and other years fewer. Only in the dry forests of the Southwest does the extent and severity of fires seem to be outside the historic norm.

The scientists also said there is no one-size-fits-all approach, and that forest managers should tailor fire-management actions to local conditions. No matter what approach is used, however, it is essential to prioritize enhancing forests' ecological resilience. This should include letting fires burn in locations where critical infrastructure, people and special ecological values are not at risk, and introducing prescribed burns where possible.

Mechanical thinning of forests is often proposed to reduce fire risks. The scientists said this is not technically possible in many locations, and often undermines the health and resilience of forests. In the Northwest, thinning also immediately releases carbon into the atmosphere and undermines forests' future capacity to sequester carbon, increasing the risks of climate disruption.

Instead, they said that agencies and communities should work together to identify high-priority locations where fuel loads need to be reduced, and in these areas prescribed burns generally should be the first treatment of choice.

Where using fire is not possible, carefully planned and implemented mechanical thinning might be used — knowing that thinning can have harm ecosystems and release carbon into the atmosphere. In addition, the scientists said that post-fire salvage logging has little ecological benefit and undermines forest health and resilience.

North suggested that one way to implement this new approach is to divide the landscape into zones where different fire management strategies are used, as is done by Canada's parks agency. In areas close to communities, fuels reduction might rely primarily on mechanical thinning.

In the intermediate zone beyond the wildland-urban interface, a combination of prescribed burns and thinning could be used. In remote forested areas, wildfires would be allowed to burn and in some cases intentionally started.

A more ecologically sound and cost-effective response to wildfires exists. Taxpayers should demand that agencies rapidly implement a new approach.

*Bob Doppelt of Eugene is executive director of The Resource Innovation Group. He writes a monthly column for The Register-Guard on issues related to climate change.*