

Opinion: Forest mismanagement bad for everyone

By Larry Weitzman

Recently several large wildfires burned up thousands of acres of coastal forests in several areas of California. While this is a disaster in and of itself, it also killed many people and burned down thousands of homes. The damages were so great that some insurers have chosen to leave the home and fire insurance business as losses were in the billions of dollars. Homeowners in the aftermath were left scrambling to acquire new insurance even if their homes were not in dangerous areas.

There are two issues. The first is maintaining safe forests and the second is the risk of building homes in “unsafe” fire areas and maintaining property in a safe manner. It’s like building homes in areas of flooding where rivers have a history of flooding and the continued rebuilding in those very areas that flooded so they can flood again with the same attendant damages for which the federal government, meaning you and I get to pay for again through heavily subsidized federal flood insurance and FEMA grants.



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But we have tied our own hands in handling this fire problem whether the main fuel is from oak trees or pine trees. We have passed laws “protecting” them; mostly the result of tree hugger types perhaps thinking if they save a tree, they will

live forever. How does a tree hugger ever justify mowing their own grass? There are state laws, local ordinances and even an El Dorado County General Plan policy (7.4.2.8, sometimes known as the Oak Resources Management Plan and Oak Woodland Management Plan) that “protects” oak trees and costs you lots of money.

These laws and ordinances place a large and expensive burden and restrictions on your property. If you have property of an acre or more, it can cost you tens of thousands of dollars in oak tree hoops you will have to jump through to develop your property, with the filing of forms, hiring of experts, mitigations costs and the list goes on. If you violate the law, the penalties can be horrendous, running into the tens of thousands of dollars. We probably lost more oak trees in the last year from fires than private property owners could ever cut down in 20 years.

But let’s look at what saving the oak trees has cost us in just the last year. According to CalFire, these fires which appear to be naturally caused, burning over dense underbrush and wild grasses which eventually ignite the dense oak trees. The oak trees then “crown” or the tops of the trees explode with fire. And then the worst happens, the spread of the fire by “crowning” oak trees as their embers from the leaves travel in the fire created windstorm and ignite fires miles away.

This kind of fire recently burned through the Wine Country area of California including hundreds of homes in Santa Rosa. The damages from these northern coastal California fires last year are reported to exceed \$9.4 billion in insurance claims alone (many people were underinsured) with some estimates going as high as \$180 billion in total economic losses. And I haven’t even discussed billions of dollars in losses and damages from the Southern California Thomas Fire of nearly 300,000 acres.

Residential properties reported about 6,000 total loses and

almost 20,000 homes received some damage. The over 6,000 vehicles destroyed are mere pocket change. And then there were the mudslides. It was a horrendous event. And I haven't even touched on the loss of life, human and animal and the destruction of the lives of those who survived.

And we spent several billion dollars in fighting these fires and lost some brave firefighters in the process. One more "cost" that is never talked about is the release of uncontrolled pollution. We spend billions on smog checks and equipment for our automobiles (over \$40 billion annually) and one big fire wipes out any gains. "Carbon banking" through trees has huge risks.

And the main fuels for these fires are brush, weeds and oak trees. The very trees we protect in which oak trees take on more importance than people.

Forest mismanagement has been a problem in this country and is similar to the Endangered Species Act, which has been used to hurt humans. Some "scientists" considered the small pox virus an endangered species. Our forests, whether pine or oak, have been burning as a result of this mismanagement for decades. Any forester worth his photosynthesis will tell you there are too many trees in our forests, double and triple a fire safe amount. But we pass laws to prevent their harvesting and pass laws making property owners pay huge fees to remove them. As a result, we have big deadly and damaging fires and a dead lumber industry. Brilliant.

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.