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Fires and drought are a warning from nature

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The San Diego and Los Angeles areas are hit by a raging series of high-impact wildfires -- the worst in the state's history. Many of the blazes coincide with areas already scorched in 2003 by fires that themselves were declared California's worst ever.

But is there any move to get away from the areas where a century of firefighting has left many forests choked and overgrown, thick underbrush creating tinderbox conditions?

Apparently not. Most homeowners vow that they'll stay in the fire-prone areas, or return to rebuild on the charred foundations of their former homes.

Across the continent, "exceptional drought" -- the National Weather Service's worst category -- impacts Georgia and neighboring states. Water levels in Lake Lanier, the 38,000-acre north Georgia reservoir that supplies water to almost 5 million people, fall so drastically that the lake may dip into its storage capacity dregs in less than four months.

But Georgia limps along without a state water plan. No one wants to talk about water rationing. In suburban rings around Atlanta, planned new subdivisions don't have to prove a long-term water source before developers plunge into construction.

"We're growing faster than our water resources. We have a shortage, not only in drought, but when it's raining," says Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin.

A stiffer assessment comes from Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore.: "Georgia has been sleepwalking. The Atlanta region has the most rapid growth rate in the history of urbanization. But Georgia's never done an assessment of its water capacity."

Myopia about the future

In California, myopia about the future seems profound. Natural watersheds, warned California Forestry Director Ruben Grijalva last June, are being seriously encroached. With baby boomers and others buying large houses up and over the canyons, man-made structures and paved surfaces are expanding rapidly, increasing surface runoff during storms. That leads, in turn, to more soil erosion and less water for trees or vegetation. The inevitable result: more fires, whether intentional or accidental. Smarter land-use planning for the fire-prone areas tops Grijalva's list of solutions. But instead, notes Bill Fulton of Solimar Research in Ventura, Calif., "We Californians are trying to fireproof ourselves" by building houses with buffers and fire-retardant construction materials.

He notes the obvious: "Subdivisions in highly flammable forests don't make much sense."

It's not just a California problem. This year, Idaho and Utah have seen their largest wildfires in the last 50 to 100 years; Arizona, Colorado and Oregon registered their record years in 2002, and Texas in 2006, Tom Swetnam, a University of Arizona scientist, told a congressional hearing recently.

Repeatedly, Congress faces calls for disaster supplemental funds. "Our hearts go out every time. But it's really governmental malpractice," Blumenauer insists, whether the issues are fires, floods, reinsuring homes on constantly pounded barrier islands or letting people relocate in New Orleans' low-lying Ninth Ward. "We never seem to tie the pieces of causation and prevention together."

A losing battle with nature

It's all but sure to get worse, he notes, with rising temperatures and an expected 100 million more Americans by 2043: "Government has promised more than nature can deliver; we're using our resources to protect a status quo that is not protectable."

Assuming he's right, what to do? One idea: Congress could create a new set of federal watershed basin authorities, not to dictate to state and local governments but rather to sit down with them to

balance risk and investment. Reasonable levels of federal construction funding could reward state and local agreements to focus on prevention, careful planning, adaptation to the immutable forces of nature and climate change.

Catherine Ross of Georgia Tech suggests including accords on critical infrastructure -- the base of state, regional, national competitiveness.

Easy to do in a complex federal system? No. But the urgency is becoming obvious. This century is already too dangerous to keep sitting on our hands.

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