



Fire, water and denial

Neal Peirce / Syndicated columnist

Could there be a pattern here?

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 its neighboring states. Water levels in Lake Lanier, the 38,000-acre 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.

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."

In California, there's praise for the professionalism of last week's firefighting effort. President Bush rushed to send federal firefighters, aircraft, grants for temporary housing and repairs, plus funding to clean up debris.

But the myopia about the future seems profound. Climate change is already having an apparent impact, with a 1-degree Fahrenheit temperature rise across the West. "Megafires" are sprouting; fire seasons are far longer than just 20 years ago.

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. Media attention last week focused on how that tactic actually protected some subdivisions. Though Fulton notes the obvious: Smart land-use planning is an infinitely superior solution; "subdivisions in highly flammable forests don't make much sense."

And 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. More than 8 million acres have burned this year, the second-largest number in history, behind 2006.

There's now a "flame zone" of states suffering persistent drought and susceptibility to faster, hotter, more erratic wildfires, intensified by global warming, says Blumenauer.

And it's all but sure to get worse, he notes, with rising temperatures and an expected 100 million more Americans by 2043.

Assuming Blumenauer's right, what to do? One possible 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 — negotiating, perhaps, reasonable levels of federal construction funding in return for state and local agreement to focus on prevention, careful planning, adaptation to the immutable forces of nature and climate change.

Including, Catherine Ross of Georgia Tech suggests, accords on critical infrastructure.

Easy to do in a complex federal system? No. But there has to be a better formula than we have now. It's obvious: This century is already too dangerous to keep sitting on our hands.

Neal Peirce's column appears alternate Mondays on editorial pages of The Times. His e-mail address is nrp@citistates.com

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