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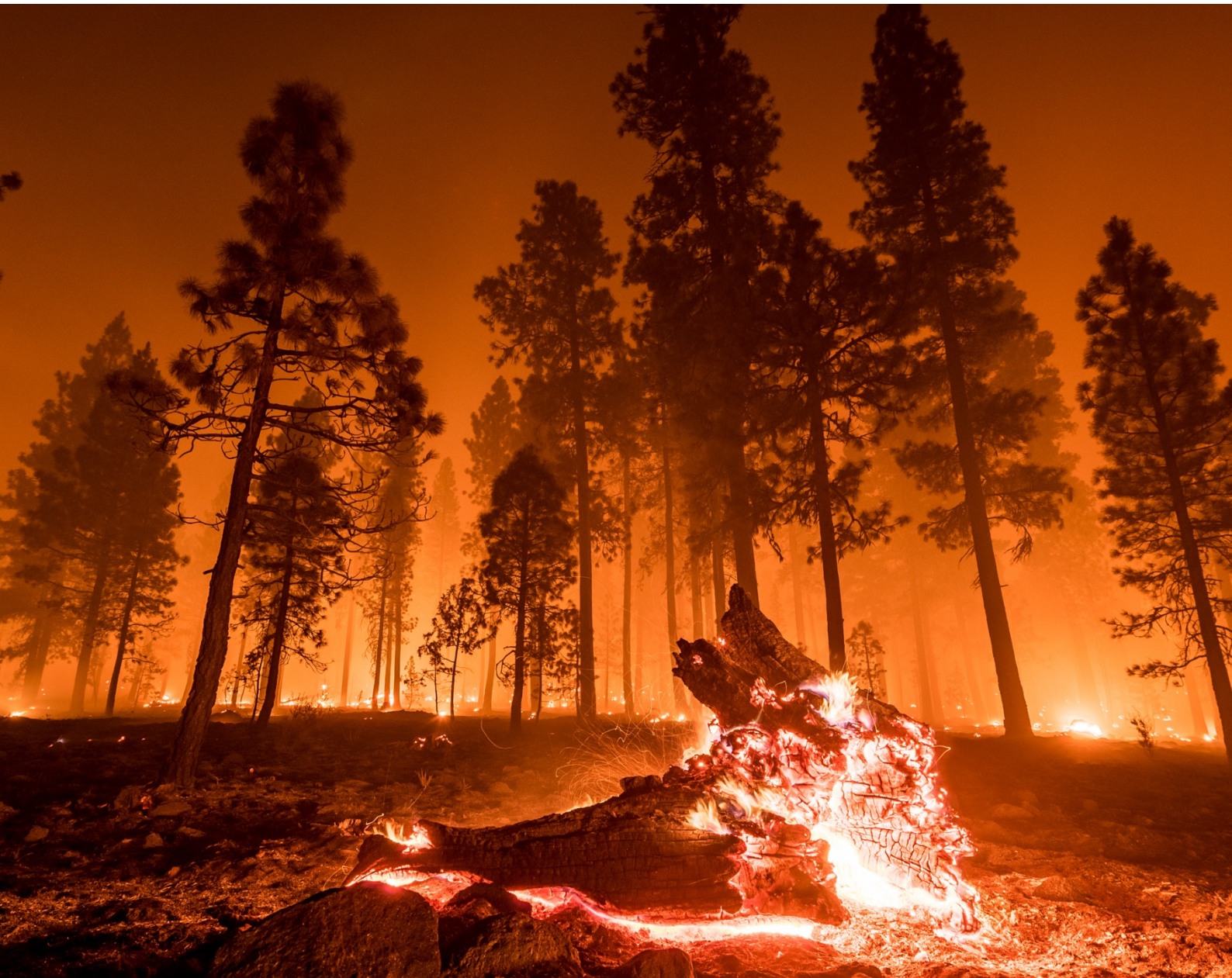
CRUDE ACCOUNTABILITY

ADDRESSING THE INCREASING THREAT OF WILDFIRES IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES & BEYOND



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About Crude Accountability

Crude Accountability is an environmental and human rights non-profit organization that works with communities in the Caspian and Black Sea regions, which struggle against threats to local natural resources and negative health impacts. Crude Accountability works on the local, national, regional, and international levels in partnership with communities and organizations committed to a just and environmentally sustainable world. Based in Northern Virginia, Crude Accountability also collaborates with other environmental organizations in the United States.

About the Author

Kyle Ferrar

Kyle Ferrar is the Western Program Director at FracTracker Alliance where the majority of his current projects focus on extraction activities in California and Colorado. His time and energy is focused on supporting the needs of grassroots organizations in these geographies. Kyle has worked on extraction related environmental justice issues since 2007, and began his career as a staff researcher at the Center for Healthy Environments and Communities at the University of Pittsburgh, where he completed his graduate work.

His current work focuses on connecting the knowledge of empirical research with the stories told by regulatory monitoring data, and leveraging these connections to uplift the lived experiences communicated by frontline communities.

Introduction

Wildfires have become a global issue, particularly in the past five to 10 years, causing significant damage to communities, economies, and the environment. This policy paper focuses on the main factors contributing to the increase in wildfires, the impact of land management practices, and the necessary policy changes to address this growing threat. It highlights the importance of reducing carbon emissions, implementing effective fuel reduction strategies, and protecting frontline communities from the health risks associated with wildfires. The paper emphasizes the need for state-level action, while also considering international cooperation through organizations like the OSCE.

In California, we now witness the presence of a distinct wildfire season, which was not the case previously.[1] Residing in the Sierra Nevadas, near Lake Tahoe, I find myself located in a high-risk wildfire area myself.[2] I have personally experienced multiple evacuations due to these devastating events.

Over the last ten years, California has endured eight out of the ten largest wildfires ever recorded in the state.[3] Similar trends emerge when we consider the period since 2000, with 18 out of the 20 largest wildfires in California's history occurring during this timeframe.[4]

[1] https://projects.capradio.org/california-fire-history/#6/35.493/-119.777
[2] See El Dorado County, https://osfm.fire.ca.gov/divisions/community-wildfire-preparedness-and-mitigation/wildfire-preparedness/fire-hazard-severity-zones/fire-hazard-severity-zone-maps/
[3] https://34c031f8-c9fd-4018-8c5a-4159cdff6b0d-cdn-endpoint.azureedge.net/-/media/calfire-website/our-impact/fire-statistics/featured-items/top20_acres.pdf?rev=be2a6ff85932475e99d70fa9458dca79&hash=A355A978818640DFACE7993C432ABF81
[4] Ibid.

Factors Contributing to Increased Wildfires

There are multiple factors contributing to the escalating prevalence of wildfires. Rising global temperatures, prolonged droughts, and hot spells have created favorable conditions for the ignition and spread of wildfires. Climate change, primarily driven by the release of greenhouse gasses from human activities, exacerbates these conditions and increases the intensity and frequency of wildfires.

Wildfires have always occurred. They have been a recurring natural phenomenon in forested regions, including secondary forests.[5] The extensive deforestation activities including the transition from old growth forests to secondary forests have led to the accumulation of fuel loads, such as brush and undergrowth, which act as ladder fuels.[6]

We are living in secondary forests. When we had old-growth forests across the United States, wildfires would come through but there was not as much ladder fuel.

There are a lot of land practices that can improve the situation. For instance, the Civilian Conservation Corps, under Roosevelt's New Deal, put 2 million people to work cleaning forests and restoring its health.[7]

Ironically, the New Deal and the Public Works Association were killed by a group called Duke Energy, Duke Power, today known as Duke Energy. Duke Energy is a contributor to Senator Manchin, and Senator Manchin, of course, was one of the individuals who killed the Build Back Better plan, which had a lot of resources for

[5] Secondary forests are post-logged areas that have grown back with unnaturally high density of thin trees and little biodiversity.
[6] Ladder fuel is the small brush and undergrowth within the forest that allow the wildfires to spread into the upper layers of the canopy and create these monstrous, incredibly hot, and intense wildfires that burn all the trees, resulting in more destructive and difficult-to-control fires.
[7] https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/fall/ccc.html

putting people to work in forestry management, which would have gone a long way in helping to clear this ladder fuel that has built up.

We need a modern-day Civilian Conservation Corps. We need people and groups to clear and reduce this fuel to ladder into the canopies. And until we address this issue, we are going to continue suffering from monstrous wildfires.

Also, controlled burns can be a very powerful tool for reducing the intensity of wildfires.

There is a lot of indigenous knowledge that has instructed the preservation of forest health, and it has been ignored for a long time. We continue to clear-cut large swaths of land for logging operations. We continue to reduce healthy forests to secondary forests, and we are not optimizing the indigenous knowledge that has been used to preserve its health in the past.

Combining fuel reduction with controlled burn operations can go a long way in reducing the intensity of future wildfires.

The challenge lies in the convergence of extreme heat events, drought conditions, and limited water resources. When there are highly combustible dry fuel sources and hot spells, those factors exacerbate the intensity of these forest fires, putting them into some of the most destructive wildfires that history has ever seen.

The root cause of this exacerbation can be traced back to the emission of greenhouse gasses from fossil fuel consumption. This leads to an escalation in global temperatures, which in turn contributes to the occurrence of prolonged droughts.

The combination of increased temperatures and drought conditions acts as a catalyst, intensifying forest fires to an alarming extent that we are not able to mitigate.

Impacts of Wildfires

The fires caused billions of dollars of damage, major displacements of people and animals, and significant loss of environmental resources and habitats, including sensitive habitats throughout the state.[8] And that's just California. Colorado is experiencing similar impacts, along with Idaho and Texas, and even the East Coast states at this point.

Smoke from wildfires is particularly dangerous because of the chemicals that are released during wildfires. It's not a typical particulate matter that is expelled from a campfire. These wildfires are burning through homes and industrial facilities, where they're releasing massive amounts of chemicals.

The exposure scenarios are particularly high risk, and as we move into this new climate future, the risk from inhalation of smoke, in addition to the risk of displacement and physical impacts from wildfires, are ranking as one of the highest concerns for climate change impacts here in the United States and worldwide.

[8] https://ccst.us/wp-content/uploads/The-Costs-of-Wildfire-in-California-FULL-REPORT.pdf

Wildfires & Climate Justice

We know that extreme heat events disproportionately impact marginalized communities. It is crucial to acknowledge that these events, driven by climate change, disproportionately affect communities and individuals already burdened by poverty and socioeconomic challenges.

Access to air conditioning is a major issue for these extreme heat and extreme weather events.

Since 2000, over 4,000 people have died in California just from these extreme heat events alone.[9] And these are predominantly low-income and marginalized communities, communities of color in Los Angeles and the Central Valley.[10]

When we look at wildfire risk and who is impacted there, disenfranchised neighborhoods often lack access to essential resources, such as grants to do proper forestry mediation and forest management, as opposed to wealthier communities that are able to put funds towards those issues, thereby taking advantage of existing state grants.

A lot of the grants in California are only partial grants, requiring communities or individuals to contribute 20% of the costs to do programs like forest clearing and the state would support the rest. Those 20% is still a very expensive price for a lot of areas, endearing grants and resources inaccessible.

The aforementioned challenges highlight the urgent need to address environmental justice and climate justice concerns.

In addition to the points above, it is important to highlight the significance of the working-class issue and perspective. The recent demise of the Build Back Better plan is reminiscent of the abandonment of the Public Works projects during the

[9] https://trackingcalifornia.org/heat-related-illness/heat-related-deaths-summary-tables
[10] https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-10-28/extreme-heat-built-environment-equity

New Deal era. These decisions were driven by concerns arising from tight labor markets. These programs put people to work, give jobs, and reduce surplus labor. Consequently, industries and corporate interests lobbied against these bills, seeking to safeguard their own agendas.

This situation underscores the pressing nature of the working-class issue. The United States lacks a dedicated Workers Party that can effectively counter corporate-driven policies that lobby against bills that would provide jobs and put people to work.

The repercussions of a tight labor market are twofold: it leads to increased wages and improved worker compensation. While this may be favorable for workers, it poses an issue for corporations and industries.

The absence of a cohesive force representing the interests of the working class in the political landscape exacerbates this issue. Consequently, bills that could provide employment opportunities and benefit the labor force face formidable opposition from corporate influences, further deepening the divide.

Addressing the Wildfire Crisis

Addressing the increase in wildfires and forest fires requires a multi-faceted approach involving state-level actions and international cooperation.

When it comes to the state level, California has taken the lead in putting resources toward forest management. Fuel reduction plans and programs here in California have been effective in certain areas.[11] There needs to be more resources going towards that trend, and until more resources are prioritized towards fuel reduction operations, the states continue working with what they have. There needs to be a civilian conservation corps focused on fuel reduction operations, prioritizing the health of our forests and reducing forest fires fuels, which will reduce wildfire intensity. In the first quarter of 2023, California has only issued one new drilling permit statewide. This is a big shift from previous policy here. We are still pushing the administration and our regulators, California Department of Geological Energy Management (CalGEM), to stop permitting workover, rework and redrill operations, particularly close to marginalized communities and other sensitive receptors such as schools, hospitals, and prisons, as well as in other areas where people are congregating and living. We are the only major extraction state in the United States that does not have a public health protection setback law.[12] Operators are able to drill right next to people's homes in California, and that puts people at risk of exposure to VOCs, which increases risks of preterm birth, low birth weight and a number of birth defects, in addition to exposing communities to cancer-causing VOCs, as well as neurotoxins and hydrocarbons that have other health impacts and respiratory irritants.

By reducing community exposures, and protecting frontline communities from these acute, chronic, and toxic impacts of pollutants, we are also decreasing the greenhouse gases that are released into the atmosphere, which are exacerbating

[11] https://www.fire.ca.gov/what-we-do/natural-resource-management/fuels-reduction

[12] California passed a public health protection setback law in November 2023 (interview with Kyle Ferrar was conducted April 2023). However, oil companies have issued a referendum: https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/big-oil-forces-a-hold-on-california-law-ending-neighborhood-drilling/#:~:text=In%20September%202022%2C%20Governor%20Newsom,with%20oil%20and%20gas%20extraction.

climate change. So California is on the right track but is not doing enough to protect frontline communities and needs to be doing more to reduce greenhouse gases here. However, California is still ahead of states like Colorado, New Mexico, Texas and Wyoming.

Recommendations

The policy recommendations presented in this paper aim to mitigate the risks associated with wildfires, protect vulnerable communities, and promote sustainable land management practices. By implementing these recommendations, the OSCE and its member states can contribute to a more resilient and sustainable future, ensuring the well-being of communities and the preservation of ecosystems in the face of the growing threat of wildfires.

First and foremost, we have to get our carbon emissions into control. That is the main driver of these climate change issues that are increasing the capacity for forest fires. It is a big task and, unfortunately, not much actual work is being done.

State-Level Recommendations

Strengthen forest management and fuel reduction programs:

- Establish and fund comprehensive fuel reduction programs, focusing on the removal of ladder fuels and the promotion of controlled burns in collaboration with indigenous knowledge and practices.
- Prioritize the preservation of old-growth forests and the restoration of forest health to reduce the intensity and spread of wildfires.
- Create a modern-day Civilian Conservation Corps to provide resources and manpower for fuel reduction operations.

Implement Public Health Protection Setback Laws:

- Enact legislation that establishes setback distances between oil and gas extraction operations and sensitive receptors such as communities, schools, hospitals, and prisons.

- Develop and enforce regulations to minimize exposure to volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and other hazardous pollutants released during extraction operations.
- Prioritize the protection of frontline communities and address environmental justice and climate justice concerns.

International-Level Recommendations (OSCE)

Promote Knowledge Sharing and Cooperation:

- Facilitate knowledge sharing and cooperation among OSCE member states regarding best practices for wildfire prevention, management, and response.
- Create a platform for exchanging information, experiences, and lessons learned on addressing wildfires and their impacts, particularly in regions where this is a shared challenge.
- Encourage collaboration between OSCE member states and international organizations to develop joint strategies and initiatives for combating wildfires and mitigating their environmental and social consequences.

Support Climate Change Mitigation Efforts:

- Advocate for comprehensive climate change mitigation measures at the international level, emphasizing the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.
- Encourage OSCE member states to meet their climate commitments under international agreements, such as the Paris Agreement.
- Provide technical assistance and capacity building support to countries in developing sustainable land management practices and adopting renewable energy sources as alternatives to fossil fuels.

Strengthen Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Response:

- Promote the development and implementation of comprehensive disaster risk reduction strategies that incorporate wildfire prevention, preparedness, and response measures.
- Support the training and capacity building of emergency responders and local communities in effectively managing and responding to wildfires.
- Foster collaboration between OSCE member states to provide mutual assistance during wildfire emergencies, including sharing resources, expertise, and equipment.

Support Vulnerable Communities:

- Recognize the disproportionate impacts of wildfires on marginalized communities and advocate for policies that address the underlying social, economic, and environmental inequities.
- Prioritize resources and assistance to support the resilience and well-being of these communities in the face of increasing wildfire risks.

Data Transparency & Accessibility

It is vital to ensure regulatory agencies publish data related to environmental impacts, including air and water quality, emissions, and pollution from extraction operations.

It is also necessary to improve data presentation and accessibility to support grassroots organizations, researchers, and policymakers in analyzing and addressing the impacts of wildfires and extraction activities. Organizations like FracTracker use our knowledge and resources to pull data from regulatory agencies and create reports and materials that show these impacts. But when regulatory agencies refuse to publish this data, it creates a lack of materials that we can use to drive policy change.

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