

Trump's Western Firefighters

Interior reverses years of neglect on forest management.



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The current hurricane season is capturing most media attention, but Westerners have been living through another nasty season of wildfires. So full marks for Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, who is reversing years of federal neglect to prevent more fires.

Last week Mr. Zinke issued a memo instructing his land managers and park superintendents to use the “full authority” of their bureaus to begin clearing the dead and dying trees and brush that clog federal lands and are a tinderbox for Western wildfires. This is the first time in more than 20 years that Interior will, as the memo notes, “proactively work to prevent forest fires through aggressive and scientific fuels reduction managements to save lives, homes, and wildlife habitat.”

Forest Service policies have contributed to a fuels buildup for more than a century. But Bill Clinton turbocharged the mismanagement in the 1990s when he sharply reduced logging and

road-building in federal forests. This has let disease and insect infestations run rampant, and fire proliferation is one result.

The number and intensity of Western megafires is growing, and this year some 47,000 wildfires torched eight million acres—an area the size of Maryland. Bigger and more intense fire seasons now also routinely destroy thousands of homes, and more than 450 firefighters have been killed on duty since 1990.

Before the Clinton era, the Forest Service spent about 16% of its annual budget fighting fires once underway. In 2015 it had to spend more than half for the first time in its 110-year history. The rising costs mean the Forest Service must poach money from programs aimed at preventing fires through better forest restoration and management.

Forest cleanup has become a local, bipartisan cause in the West, as state officials, land owners and others coalesce for more active debris removal and forest thinning. The opposition comes from environmental groups, often out of state, that dislike forest management and swoop in to stop the deals.

In Montana, where 200,000 acres are burning, the Alliance for the Wild Rockies and Friends of the Wild Swan recently sued to stop a proposal for tree-thinning and limited burning in the Flathead National Forest. They are fighting a mere 1,800-acre commercial timber harvest. The same groups that fret about climate change and pollution don't mind policies that result in the burning of entire carbon sinks that spew smoke and noxious chemicals.

Beyond Mr. Zinke's memo, Congress can help with legislation to reduce frivolous litigation and streamline permitting for active forest management. Reform should include changes to the National Environmental Policy Act's environmental review process and the infamous Equal Access to Justice Act, which green groups have exploited to sue and then force taxpayers to cover their litigation costs.

The federal government owns upward of 50% of the land in many Western states. The GOP Congress has a chance to build bipartisan coalitions to better manage federal lands and reduce the fire damage that scars the West each year.