

Larry Herzog: The politics of the wildfires

[By Larry Herzog](#)

Editor's Note: This is the first in a two part series. The second titled, "What should our politicians and policy makers be doing?" will be published in the coming weeks.

The 2009 wildfire season has roared into California. Will the smoke and flames we've seen sweeping down from the hills in L.A. once again show up in the eastern suburbs of San Diego? After two wildfires scorched the San Diego region in 2003 and 2007, you would think our leaders would be rushing to put in place a comprehensive ecological land management plan for our fire-prone inland suburbs. Think again.

Instead, our pro-development politicians, aided by traditional conservative media, have confined their actions to more narrow and politically safe terrain-advocating new helicopters to drop water on the fires, a few new fire trucks, individual house improvement guidelines, vegetation clearing, and a plan to provide evacuation facilities for residents driven out of their homes.

On the most critical issue of all-planning how and where we build our suburbs-our leaders have been jarringly silent. A Los Angeles Times writer put it best back in 2007, "The question is never-why am I building here on this hillside, that predictably catches fire every few years....it is instead, how can technology and new materials-how can progress-protect me from the dangers inherent in living where I have chosen to live?" How much longer are politicians going to play this dangerous game of ignoring the growth pattern? How much longer are we going to continue building our new suburbs right into the mouth of the wildfire danger zone?

According to the "Fire Safe Council," Southern California's 2003 and 2007 mega-scale wildfires, the most frightening and ecologically devastating ever, burned an estimated 1.25 million acres and destroyed slightly more than 5,600 homes. Nearly one half million people were evacuated from their residences.

These firestorms did not smolder in some distant wilderness. They burned in exactly the places where people have moved over the last two decades- Escondido, Chula Vista, Poway (Scripps Ranch), Rancho Bernardo, Rancho Santa Fe, Pacific Highlands Ranch, Ramona, Jamul, Alpine, Dulzura, Valley Center. What was once the "back country," the eastern fringes of our region, is now the "Wildland Urban Interface," an arc defining the space where mountains and open lands to the east bump up against our fastest growing suburbs.

This is where the remaining vacant tracts of land lie, and where, prior to the recession, developers were aiming their bulldozers.

This Aug. 30, 2009 file photo shows a deer escaping a wildfire in the Angeles National Forest. Southern California's huge wildfire has turned nearly a quarter of the 1,000-square-mile Angeles National Forest into a moonscape of barren mountains looming above thousands of homes that now could face the threat of flash floods and mudslides. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

But this region will burn, if we don't do something soon. These massive suburban tract developments, as experts have shown, become like giant stacks of fuel feeding the wildfires, turning them into raging infernos that become impossible to control, even with helicopters dropping buckets of water, and the finest fleet of fire trucks. Three out of four homes built in San Diego since 1990 lie in this wildland danger zone. Many of these homes are bloated way beyond the average size of average American homes; until recently, few of them were designed to withstand the searing heat of nature's firestorms. Many are built on the edges of mesas, right where the hottest flames roar when they spread up the steep hilly slopes. As award winning writer and local resident Mike Davis has said about San Diego (and the rest of southern California), "... through the foothills, free range McMansions often castellated in unconscious self-caricature occupy rugged ocean view decks surrounded by what foresters grimly refer to as 'diesel stands' of dying pine and old brush."

Meanwhile, politicians are serving up limited wildfire "solutions," some of which are, in fact, misguided.

Critics like fire expert Richard Halsey have responded. Halsey has written that the importance of air drops of water on fire fighting is grossly exaggerated. Halsey's Chaparral Institute takes exception to what he calls the "demonization of chaparral" - natural vegetation that grows in the eastern hills at the edge of the urbanized area. Pruning vegetation in native shrublands, he has argued, is an oversimplified solution to a more complicated problem. The two most important factors in determining whether a wildfire becomes uncontrollable are fuel moistures (humidity) and wind. Vegetation-whether in the form of trees, shrubs, or grass-won't carry the flames unless conditions are right. And there's a far more powerful fuel perfectly capable of feeding the wildfires-that fuel is suburban buildings- and especially those built from wood. So what are we doing to regulate those suburban buildings, the main source of fuel that makes wildfires so scary? To date, our regions' leadership has made every attempt to steer the wildfire narrative away from that very question- our uncontrolled suburban growth - and its form, scale, location, and design. This, aside from global warming, is the wildfire story that is not being told.

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