



Bad Policy Assures a Perpetual Sense of Burning Crisis

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By  [El Gato Malo](#) June 13, 2023 [Policy](#) 8 minute read

Forest fires are big, mediagenic events. The pictures are dramatic. The smoke they produce can spread for hundreds, even thousands of miles and can make life downwind unpleasant, even deadly for weeks on end.

They are also widely misunderstood and being used to make outlandish claims in favor of “climate policy” that has nothing whatsoever to do with the matter at hand. As ever, data may be used to illuminate or to obfuscate, and complete pictures and even modicums of perspective are conspicuously absent.

The politicization of this issue has become intense, and as we shall see, there are, in fact, politics at play, but they are not the politics being so widely and recklessly espoused.

Let’s look:

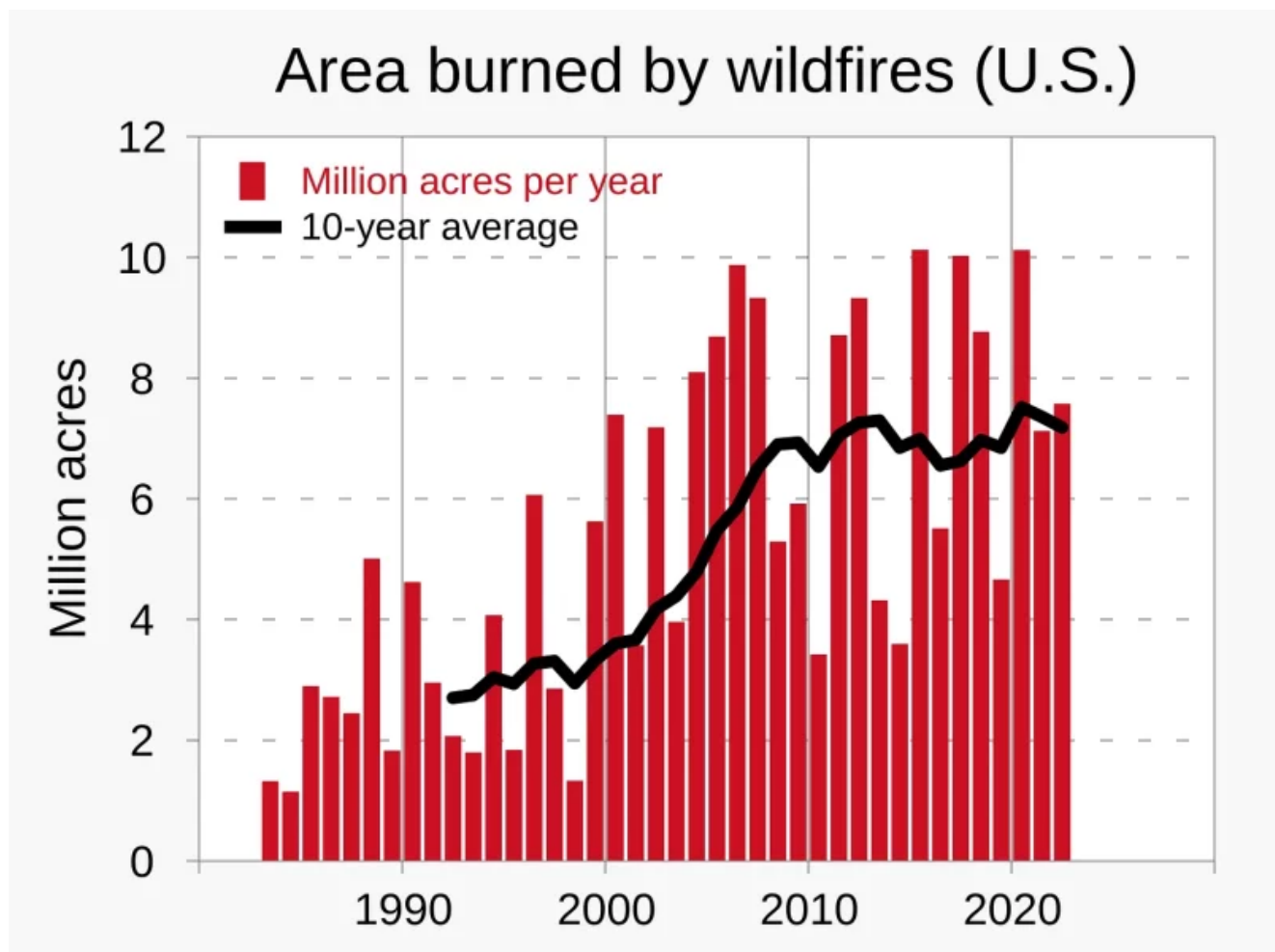
Our friends at Bloomberg are telling us this story, which is a wonderful piece of claims embedding (a common and highly effective propagandistic practice), whereby an article ostensibly about one thing embeds claims about another thing as though they were fact and uses them as a predicate for the other argument.

In this case, we have an article ostensibly about insurers fleeing California that blames this upon an “inability to react to and price in climate change,” which embeds the presumption that 1. climate change is happening and that 2. this change is the driver of more forest fires. It then goes on to presume that this rise in fires is somehow related to “increased instances of extreme weather.”

Bloomberg has been going on and on about this as insurers stop writing policies in California because risks and claims are way up, and the local regulators are refusing to allow rates to rise to reflect this. This seems like typical California economic denial but with a side order of physics denial as well because the idea that this is somehow climate change-driven (also a tentpole of California policy justification) looks unsupportable as a claim.

Basically, none of this stands up to scrutiny.

This is the chart that gets trotted out over and over to claim that “forest fires are on the rise.”

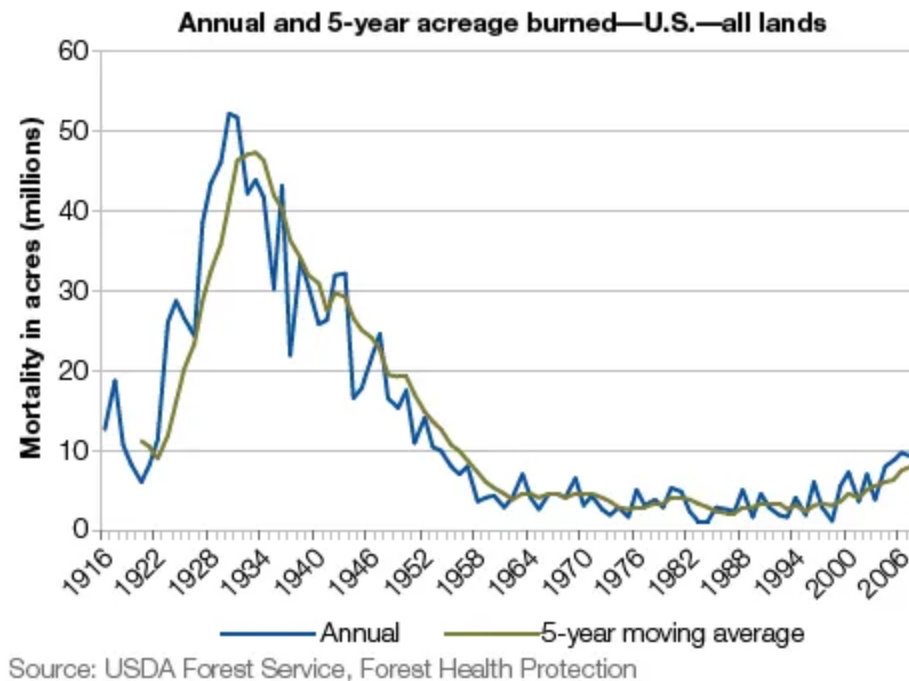


It's certainly dramatic. It looks like around 3 million acres jumped to 7 million, but there is a great deal more to the story. Firstly, this does not look like the shape one would see if the issue were "climate." It's basically a step function jump in 2000. That would seem more consistent with some more proximate cause.

Secondly, this chart lacks perspective based on its timeframe (sources).

When one zooms out, the picture looks quite different.

Figure 16-1. Total acreage burned.



We do still see some uptick, but it's pretty minor in the face of long-term trends. One might also then start to ask some probing questions about the cause of this uptick because there is certainly a case to be made that if it is to be attributed to "global warming," we'd need to see some warming in the regions purported to be affected, and that appears a very tenuous claim, especially in the timeframes described.

As described [here](#) in detail, the US climate network is a mess of data adulteration and even worse data collection. The rural temperature stations have been nearly eliminated, and those that remain have become so urban that the heat island effects of siting are adding several degrees of upward bias in readings in a manner the NOAA is making no effort to control for.

They have not even done their own site surveys, but as can be seen in the link above, a large-scale and high-quality citizen project (surfacestations.org) did so, and less than 8 percent of USCRN stations meet NOAA siting guidelines. The error bars are biased upward

and constitute multiples of the century-scale signal purported to be measured. The data is garbage.

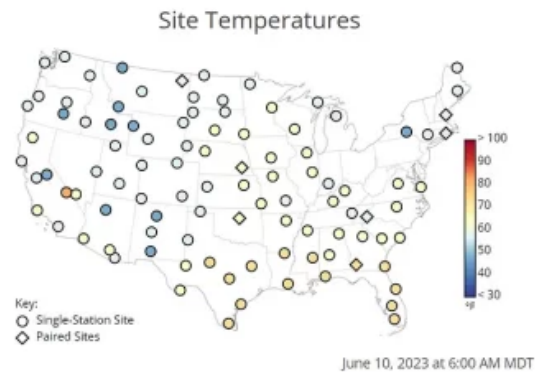
Fortunately, we have the [CRN reference network](#), a set of well-sited, continuous duration stations. This is the best, clearest, cleanest signal we have in US data using actual thermometers.

U.S. Climate Reference Network

The **U.S. Climate Reference Network (USCRN)** is a systematic and sustained network of **climate monitoring stations** with sites across the conterminous U.S., Alaska, and Hawaii. These stations use **high-quality instruments** to measure temperature, precipitation, wind speed, soil conditions, and more. Information is available on what is measured and the USCRN station instruments.

The vision of the USCRN program is to provide a **continuous series of climate observations** for monitoring trends in the nation's climate and supporting climate-impact research.

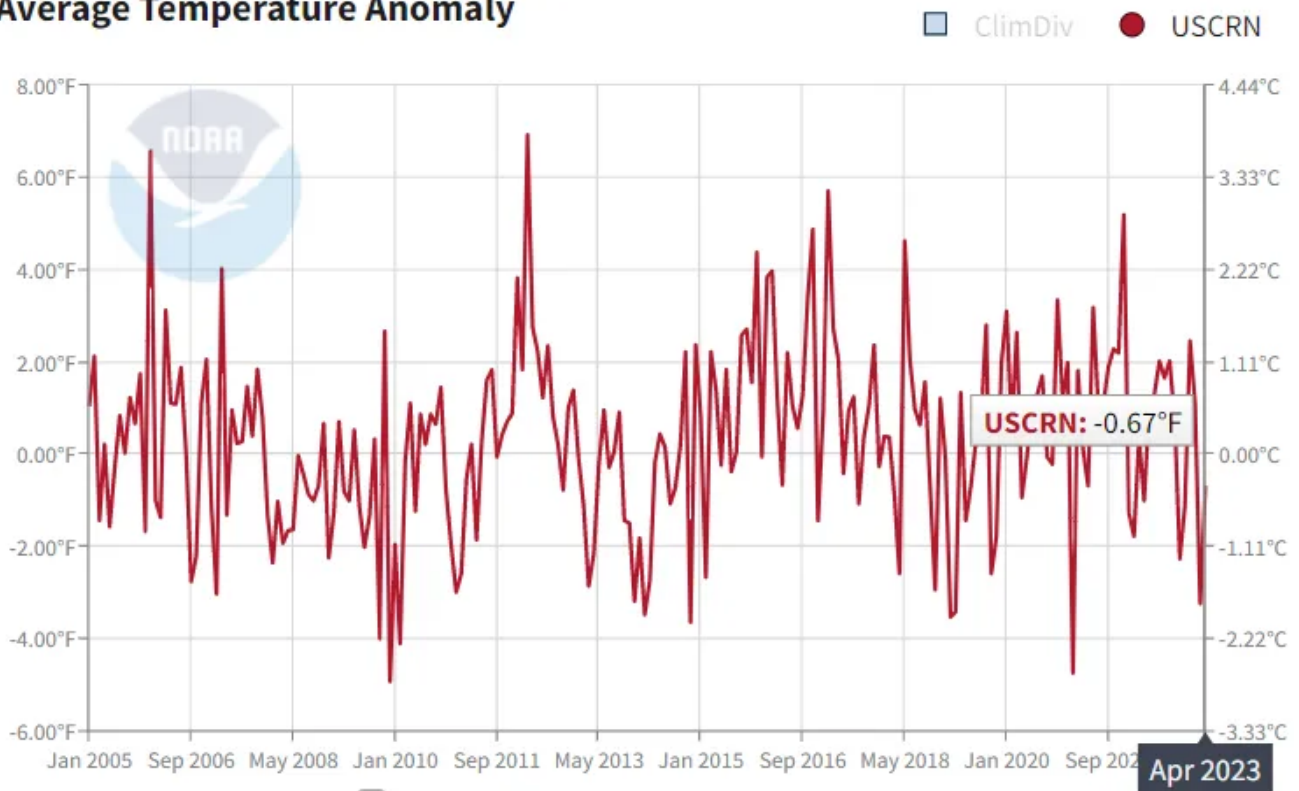
USCRN stations are managed and maintained by the Atmospheric Turbulence and Diffusion Division of the Air Resources Laboratory, NOAA Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research. The National Centers for Environmental Information maintains and distributes the USCRN observations and derived climate products.



It's somewhat limited by the fact that it has only been tracked since 2005, but the outcomes are quite provocative.

We're coming up on 20 years of zero warming trend.

Average Temperature Anomaly

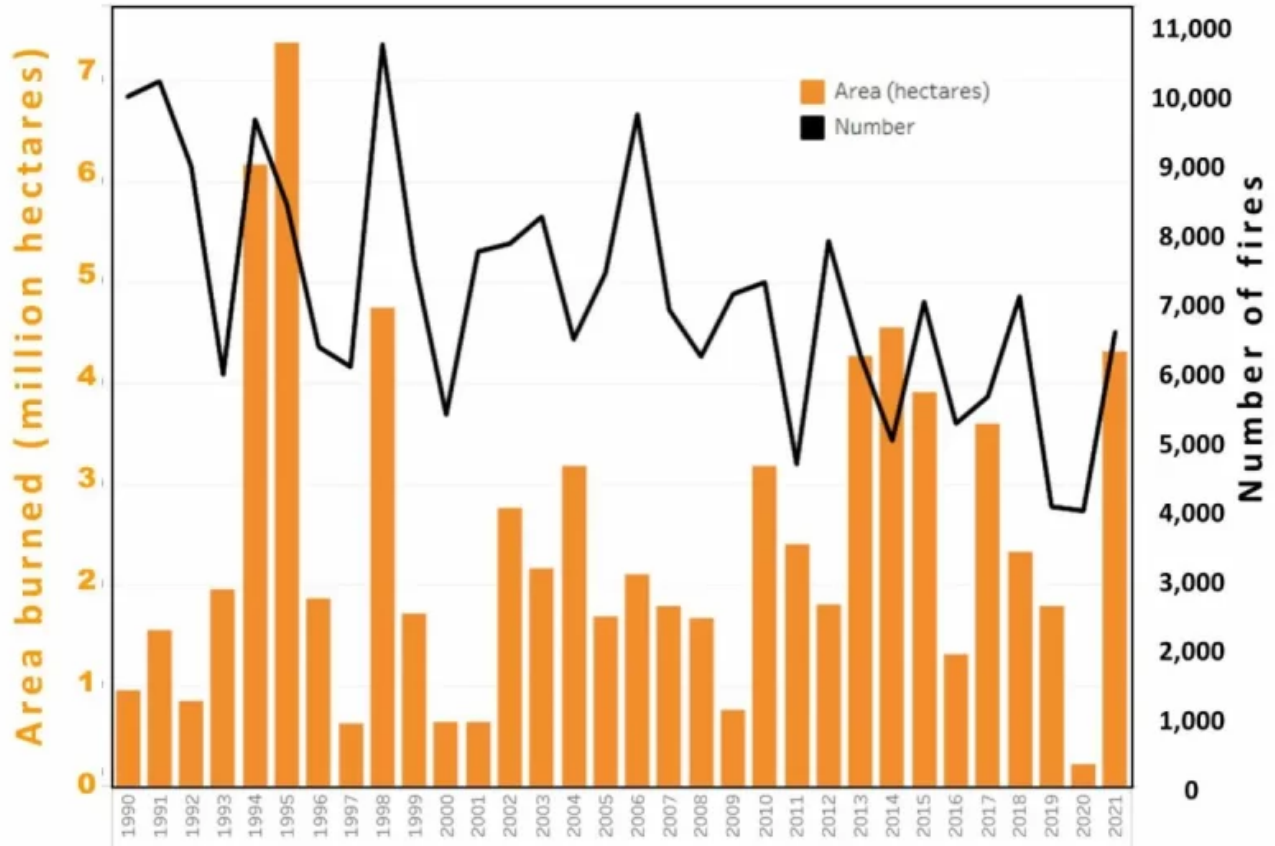


I shall leave the reader to draw their own conclusions about why this dataset is never discussed by the NOAA or climate activists and why they choose instead to frantically foreground the bad data from the larger legacy networks, despite the fact that it is so conspicuously contradicted by higher quality measurements. But I'm just seeing little to no way to look at the best data we have and claim the US has been warming over the last couple of decades.

The whole move from "global warming" to "climate change" seems a cynical ploy to try to sidestep the real "inconvenient truth": that the data is stubbornly refusing to conform to the anthropogenic climate change narrative.

Not that it stops them from telling it...

Now, clearly, Canada fires are all the rage right now as they happen to be sending smoke to New York, who (unlike the Mountain West, who has been downwind of California cum Mordor in recent years and is getting positively used to having to deal with this every summer) find such outcomes unusual. Let's add the Great White North to the mix:



There is really not much discernible trend [here](#) (graphically, it gets skewed by the one tall bar in 2021, but consider 2020 before it, and the average to something like 3 million acres).

These fires have been going on for thousands of years and are a healthy, natural, and even vital part of these forest ecosystems. They are literal burn ecologies. Fire is part of their life cycle.

But don't take my word for it, let's ask noted climate change deniers [The Canadian Forestry Department](#).

Since 1990, “wildland fires” across Canada have consumed an average of 2.5 million hectares a year.

These fires occur in forests, shrub lands and grasslands. Some are uncontrolled wildfires started by lightning or human carelessness. A small number are prescribed fires set by authorized forest managers to mimic natural fire processes that renew and maintain healthy ecosystems.

Wildland fire management: balancing the bad and the good

Wildland fires present a challenge for forest management because they have the potential to be at once harmful and beneficial. They can threaten communities and destroy vast amounts of timber resources, resulting in costly losses.

However, wildland fires are a natural part of the forest ecosystem and important in many parts of Canada for maintaining the health and diversity of the forest. In this way, prescribed fires offer a valuable resource management tool for enhancing ecological conditions and eliminating excessive fuel build-up.

Not all wildland fires should (or can) be controlled. Forest agencies work to harness the force of natural fire to take advantage of its ecological benefits while at the same time limiting its potential damage and costs.

This makes fire control strategies a vital component of forest management and emergency management in Canada.

Understanding the complex phenomenon of wildland fire begins with understanding the basic physical aspects of fire and the ecological role of fire in forests and other wildland areas. Increasingly accurate assessments of the fire situation across Canada are now helping land managers use forest science to reduce fire risk and optimize the benefits.

Because this is where we start to get to the crux of the issue and where the blame, especially in California, shifts away from “climate” and back onto “Groovy Gavin’s eco-topia” and its mélange of misbegotten eco-fables (not that he started this trend, he just seems inclined to extend and accelerate it). It’s also worth noting that other states have been considering and adopting policies akin to California, so this policy pratfall is contagious.

The unavoidable baseline fact is this: it is not climate change driving the rise in fires and especially megafires, it’s policy change.

This is an own goal and an avoidable and fixable one.

The key fact here is a simple one: an ounce of prevention is worth a million flambéd acres of cure.

Everyone used to know this. The huge drop in fires in the US came from figuring this out. It’s not an exotic technology nor some obscure practice; it’s what used to be the literal core and basis of sound forestry management.

California and many other forest regions like it are burn ecologies, and poorly conceived policy is turning them into tinderboxes.

The basic ecological process is based, even dependent on fire. Forests overgrow, dry out, burn, and replenish. The trees themselves have adapted to it.

“Giant sequoia cones are serotinous, which means that fire on the forest floor causes them to dry out, open, and release their seeds. This adaptation ensures that the tree times the release of most of its seeds to coincide with fire, which creates ideal conditions for

regeneration success.”

And it’s not going to stop by itself. If you want to safely live near these ecosystems, you need to take some action.

What works is thinning forests through logging and small, controlled burns. You need to cut down some of the trees and clear the brush. Doing this leaves more water for the trees that remain, keeps them alive and healthy instead of dead and dried out, and clearing the brush removes the kindling that lets the big fires get going.

This is not some wild, untried idea; it had generations of serious, demonstrable success but was largely terminated and/or banned by changes in budget priorities and eco laws to “save the habitats” of the fluffy-buttled warbler or whatever other forest critter seemed in peril by, well, turning their habitat into refined fuel for hellscape-sized megafires.

Perhaps not the greatest trade-off for them...

The Independent Institute has studied this [in detail](#):

Multiple government officials and agencies contributed to the unprecedented destructiveness of the 2017 and 2018 wildfire seasons by pursuing, for decades, misguided priorities and perverse incentives. This includes impeding sensible and effective fire-prevention policies. Along with Cal Fire, these blameworthy parties include past California governors and state legislators, the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, state and federal Environmental Protection Agencies, California Natural Resources Agency, California Air Resources Board (CARB) and its 35 local air-quality management districts, and various environmental organizations. While all share blame to varying degrees for the flawed public policies and their disastrous outcomes, Cal Fire and the U.S. Forest Service bear special responsibility, given their mandates to protect Californians from wildfires.

The deadly cumulative errors of the responsible parties are numerous, but some mistakes played an especially harmful role in California's recent megafires. One fundamental cause is that public agencies and officials succumbed to pressure by environmental groups who pushed for fire-management policies that take a reactive posture (fire suppression), rather than a proactive stance (fire prevention and active management). Although the hope was to preserve land in its "natural state," this approach set the stage for horrific wildfires by allowing excessive growth of fuels.

Another fundamental policy failure that encouraged deadly megafires was the shifting of decision-making authority for wildfire management away from the local communities at risk. This resulted in delays and inaction, which helped fuel the megafires. At a more operational level, public agencies have failed to proactively adopt cutting-edge fire prevention and detection technologies as early as possible.

Lest one be inclined to assume this is some fringe view, let's check in with The Nature Conservancy, a group dedicated to protecting natural forests, who has a compelling plan [here](#):

A devastating trend

Catastrophic wildfires in California continue to set new records for the “largest,” “most damaging,” “worst air quality” and sadly, “deadliest” we’ve ever seen.

The Problem | Megafires

It took 100 years to destroy the health of Sierra forests, but with the right resources, we can restore our forests in mere decades.

Thanks to Smokey Bear, a century of fire exclusion and the forced removal of Indigenous forest stewards, California’s Sierra forests are dangerously overgrown. Now, trees are packed together at up to five times their natural density, and fires that should regenerate our forests explode into infernos that destroy them. These forests help provide 60% of our state’s developed water supply, and losing them would leave millions of people without clean drinking water.

TNC has a plan to reverse this terrible trend: Ecological Forest Restoration.

And the plan involves going back to tried and tested forestry policy. California keeps trying to blame these fires on climate and power lines or lightning strikes, but the real issue is simple: tree density is WAY too high for safety, and they are surrounded by piles of forest floor tinder.

So we get dead forests instead of live ones and massive fires instead of little ones.

Fire-suppressed Forest



Ecologically managed Forest



ECOLOGICALLY MANAGED FORESTS By thinning the forest understory, we can safely reintroduce fire as a restorative process. Fire has been excluded from the forest on the left. The forest on the right has undergone Ecological Forest Restoration. © TNC

The results are not exactly subtle, are they?



Aerial view shows the differences in tree mortality after the Bootleg Fire resulting from different types of forest restoration.

The “cause” of the rise in fire is not the proximate one. It’s that the forests are not being managed, and therefore, they are incredibly susceptible to fire. A “cause” will always emerge, but this is a false framing. It’s like pumping a patient full of immune suppressants for no reason and then blaming “flu” for their sudden sickness.

Even all these accusations of arson (some of which are likely true) are only made possible by mismanaged forests. Were they cared for as they were in the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s, this sort of malicious activity would not be possible in any serious scope or scale. It’s bad forestry policy that has opened them up to attack.

The [LA Times](#) knows it.

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As California burns, some ecologists say it’s time to rethink forest management

Even [Mother Jones](#) knows it.



shanteer uses a drip-torch to start a controlled burn during the Klamath River Prescribed Fire Training Exercise. Stormy Staats



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Because this is glaringly, ostentatiously obvious and utterly, easily fixable.

There is nothing tricky or controversial here apart from a media and governmental talking point complex that refuses to acknowledge baseline reality.

So yes, this is 100 percent a political issue, but it's not the one it's being represented as. This is a policy fail. That which worked was abandoned for that which sounded good to a few eco-rubes, and now we are all paying the price.

Reality is not optional, and ecology denial is a very expensive foible.

It's time we stopped pretending that there are no trade-offs here and begin (once more) doing the sensible thing.

Consider the alternative:



Reposted from the author's [Substack](#)

Author



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El Gato Malo is a pseudonym for an account that has been posting on pandemic policies from the outset.