Your SUV Did Not Cause the California Wildfires

By Steve Goreham

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California nears the end of another disastrous wildfire season. Governor Newsom and others blame human-caused climate change for California fire destruction. But causes for the destructiveness of these fires appear to be dominated by other factors, not emissions from power plants or sport utility vehicles.

Data from the California Department of Forestry & Fire Protection shows 2019 to be another year of fire disaster. As of November 3, more than 6,000 California fires burned almost 200,000 acres, destroyed 730 structures and claimed three lives. The Kincade fire in Sonoma County north of San Francisco did the most damage, burning over 77,000 acres to date. As of November 3, this fire was 80 percent contained with the direct cause unknown.

But fire damage in 2019 so far pales in comparison to the 2017 and 2018 seasons. Both years suffered more than 1.5 million acres burned and more than 10,000 structures destroyed. Ninety-three people lost their lives in the 2018 fires.

Regarding the cause of the wildfires, Governor Gavin Newsom stated, “If anyone is wondering if climate change is real, come to California.” *CNN* headlines warned, “How the climate crisis is fueling wildfires and changing life in the Golden State.” *CBS News* announced that “Experts see a direct line between California wildfires and climate change.”

Governor Newsom also blames Pacific Gas & Electric for “years of neglect” in maintaining power lines and towers and keeping them free of brush. PG&E is a utility serving 16 million people in northern and central California.

Power lines can certainly ignite falling or wind-blown tree branches. PG&E filed for bankruptcy last January due to an estimated $30 billion in liability claims from fires caused by its

equipment in 2018 and 2017. In order to reduce fire risk, this year the company implemented a program of “safety outages,” shutting off electricity during periods of high winds to prevent fires.

On October 9, PG&E shut down power to more than 500,000 people in north California between Redding and Sacramento. On October 26, the company halted power to more than 1.3 million people in Marin County north of San Francisco, during a fierce windstorm. That same day, farther north in Lake County, a half million residents lost power, an outage that would last as long as five days.

During a period of near-freezing temperatures, Lake County residents had no light and no electricity for appliances. Spoiled food, silent cell phones, dead water pumps, and intermittent internet service disrupted daily life. Californians couldn’t plan their day without the assurance that electricity would be available.

Damage from California wildfires is rising. Ten of the top 20 most damaging fires in state history, in terms of structures destroyed, burned during the last 10 years.

But can global warming be the cause of this destructive fire increase? The world’s leading temperature data from NASA, NOAA, and East Anglia University in the United Kingdom show a global surface temperature rise of *only one* degree Celsius over the last 135 years, since 1880. It’s unlikely that a few tenths of a degree rise in California over the last few decades caused the destructiveness of these fires.

While many cite human-caused climate change, evidence shows forest management issues to be more important. California has always had dry winds and fire issues. But fire suppression, declining forest harvests, and insect damage appear to be the dominant causes for increased fire destruction.

The Little Hoover Commission report of 2018 pointed out that a century of forest fire suppression in California produced “disastrous results.” Fire suppression generated crowded forests choked with tinder-dry brush and worsened conditions for insect damage and disease. The report described “frequent low-intensity fire” as a “critical component for California’s forest ecosystems.”

In part due to strong opposition from environmental groups, the California forestry industry has been in decline for more than three decades. California harvested only 1.6 billion board-feet of timber in 2018, down 30 percent from 2000 and down 65 percent from the late 1980s. Declining forest harvests added fuel to recent destructive fires.

Insect damage is also a major factor. Forest overcrowding due to fire suppression created ideal conditions for bark beetle infestation of California’s conifers. Millions of trees now die each year from overcrowding, drought, and the bark beetle. The US Forest Service estimated in 2018 that California had 147 million dead trees, most dying since 2010.

Because of poor forest management techniques, California forests are packed with fuel and

ripe for continued destructive combustion. Rather, improved forest management is the solution to reducing the damage that wildfires cause.

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