Red Tape to Burn: Ease the Fuel Management Burden to Prevent Deadly Wildfires
Devin Stein

Heatwaves are now occurring around many parts of the world. These heat waves make it clear that hotter summers are the new normal.¹ As temperatures rise, so do concerns about the wildfires that accompany warmer climates.

In the United States, the wildfire policy debate centers on funding fuel management. “Fuel management” is the process of removing surface fuels such as grasses, small shrubs, dead branches, downed trees and logs before they can feed larger wildfires. President Trump made

headlines last year when he suggested that the U.S. should “rake” its forests like Finland.² The term “raking” oversimplifies what fuel management is and how it is done, but it is a process that Finland takes pride in that allows it to manage fuels in its forests through prescribed burns.³ Now, President Trump is pushing for the funding of the construction of several large fuel breaks.⁴ These fuel breaks clear large sections of land of all flammable materials to stop wildfires from spreading and improve firefighter access to vulnerable areas. The Trump administration recognizes the need to manage fuel buildup--but funding is only part of the story.

Fuel management is crucial to reducing the risk of large fires in the long term. But arguing about funding fuels management alone is not enough. When mellow fire seasons pass, the public loses interest, agencies lose funding, and little progress is made. Rather than focus only on funding, it needs to be made easier for government agencies, organizations, and individuals to do this work themselves.

Land managers in the United States -- both private and public -- need to manage fuel buildup every year. The problem is that many fuel management projects, including prescribed burns and commercial thinning, require regulatory approval. Public land managers are generally familiar with this process. Many private land managers are not, however, which keeps them from managing fuel loads on their land. Most private landowners simply cannot complete environmental or smoke assessments for small projects. These regulations that make it harder to manage fuels are just as problematic as the allocation of government funding.

Additionally, many of the most important places to manage fuels are on public land. This creates a tension between government agencies that manage the land, and the communities affected by

inaction. The government agencies that manage these lands are limited by resources, regulation, and politics. If these agencies are not adequately managing fuel buildup, the risk of fires grows, and when these fuels build and contribute to large fires, it is nearby communities that are most threatened.

Luckily, solutions are emerging. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) is the only government agency to increase the number of prescribed burns they complete.\(^5\) The BIA is using the indigenous knowledge of many Native American communities. Historically, Native Americans altered the North American landscape with intentionally set fires. Many of their best practices have been passed down to current generations. Although these tribes have struggled to work with government agencies in the past, the threat of fire is driving stronger partnerships between federal and tribal governments.

California governor Gavin Newsom declared a state of emergency this year.\(^6\) The state of emergency allows the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection to fast-track 35 fuels reduction projects. But Newsom is doing more than expediting funding for fuel management projects for 200 high-risk communities: Newsom's state of emergency also cuts some of the regulatory burden that slows many fuels management projects to a halt.\(^7\)

The United States could benefit from a more sustainable method of managing the forests we live in and depend upon. Americans want to more proactively address the wildfires that threaten communities across the west. But seeking increases in funding are only half of the problem. Asking for more funding is ineffective when land managers face complex and time-intensive regulations. Congress needs to fix the regulatory burden that prevent fuels management on both public and private lands to improve the way we live with wildfire.

---

