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It’s time to let some California wildfires burn



In this June 11, 2019 firefighters keep an eye on a prescribed burn in Kings Canyon National Park, Calif. The prescribed burn, a low-intensity, closely managed fire, was intended to clear out undergrowth and protect the heart of Kings Canyon National Park from a future threatening wildfire. The tactic is considered one of the best ways to prevent the kind of catastrophic destruction that has become common, but its use falls woefully short of goals in the West. (AP Photo/Brian Melley)

By **LAURIE WAYBURN**
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Should we always fear fire? Perhaps not.

A century of fire-fear and suppression has inadvertently led to the megafires that escape control. These have given wildfire a bad reputation. But California, along with most of the west, is actually fire adapted. Fire plays a critical role in keeping our land healthy and thriving. Historically, it kept fuel loads down, refreshed the soils and vegetation, and improved watershed function. Even now, wildfire itself is the biggest beneficial force reducing fuel loads on the landscape at scale.

Counterintuitively, fire itself is actually the most beneficial actor in reducing catastrophic fire risk. These lower-intensity fires clear undergrowth, add charcoal to the soil, and support native habitats. They prevent catastrophic fires by reducing excess fuels in forests and keep a lower density of trees and shrubs. Such burns also release less harmful smoke.

Our fire suppression focus has helped create the basis for megafires. The U.S. Forest Service, which manages over 50% of California forests, aims to fully suppress every unplanned fire on its lands. CAL FIRE’s goal is to contain 95% of all wildfires to 10 acres or less. Now, we know we really cannot control all fires. And, we have better knowledge, approaches, and tools to help identify which fires are likely to put people at risk and which will be helpful.

Sophia Bush's Favorite 'One Tree Hill' Lines

It's time to change our approach and embrace managing fire rather than solely seeking to suppress it.

What would we gain? A lot. Native Americans tended this land with fire for millennia, and the burning made for the beautiful, healthy paradise Europeans extolled when they first came. Low-intensity fires kept communities safe, controlled pests and diseases, and supported nutrient-rich soils that hold more water. Fire thinned out young trees that couldn't be supported through California's frequent droughts and favored large trees with thick bark, which tolerate fire.

Native Americans observed their environment closely and knew when and where to set fires. Many of these fires were set in the Fall, with cooler, shorter days and more rain. Today, Indigenous fire managers, such as the Karuk Tribe, are sharing this knowledge to help build a more fire-friendly approach to burning at the larger scale.

Most of us don't have that same intimate, firsthand knowledge of the land. But we have technologies that can help us identify which wildfires are safe to let burn. California launched FireSat wildfire detection satellites over the summer, which catch wildfires early and track plant conditions, surface temperatures, and fire intensity. The state's Fire Integrated Real-Time Intelligence System uses aircraft sensors to map fires and run predictive analytics. And a network of air-quality monitors throughout the state delivers data on when conditions allow safe smoke conditions.

To its credit, CAL FIRE has expanded prescribed (intentionally set) burns. But prescribed burns are still at very small scales. My organization, Pacific Forest Trust, completed a burn on 1,400 acres last year, which was the largest burn on a commercial forest in many decades. We need to act at a larger scale, and managed wildfire is our best tool. While we're moving in the right direction, making it easier to undertake prescribed fire, we should now change the governing policies on fire suppression, using "good fire" to manage "bad fire" and allowing wildfires to burn when safe.
Absolutely, fires that threaten people's safety, homes, and communities need to be put out. But the best action we can take to reduce the risk of high-intensity megafires is to carefully assess when it's safe to let fires burn at larger scales—or even set them—to restore a safer, more productive landscape for all.

Laurie Wayburn is president of Pacific Forest Trust (PFT) and chair of California's Natural and Working Lands Expert Advisory Committee; PFT sponsored the 2026 Good Fire Act.