

Environmentalists have stood in the way of fire prevention efforts. That has to end

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California is burning. For the second straight year, the state is suffering some of the worst wildfires in its history, and it looks like there is no end in sight for the increasing frequency of megafires.

The combination of hot temperatures and the buildup of unmanaged dry vegetation has created the perfect conditions for uncontrolled blazes. The Central Coast is no stranger to the risk and we saw how severe it can be when one of the largest fires in California history, the Thomas Fire, burned over 280,000 acres in Santa Barbara last winter.

As fires burn across the state, the problem has become so acute that lawmakers and the governor are making it the top issue as the state Legislature wraps up its business for the year.

Wildfires continue to get worse every year. It's obvious that dramatic steps are needed to thin overly dense forests and reduce the amount of dry vegetation that fuels out-of-control fires. Yet the state has been slow to invest in prevention measures and environmentalists have opposed key projects here in the region to reduce fire risk.

San Luis Obispo County is particularly vulnerable to fires. Nearly [one-third of homes](#) in the county are at risk of fire damage. Dry conditions and high temperatures mean the area remains at greater than normal risk of a large wildfire this year, and if we do not take steps to prepare, a megafire could be a local reality.

In nearby Santa Barbara, fires are quickly becoming a regular occurrence with the Holiday Fire in July and the massive Thomas Fire last December, which later created deadly mudslides in Montecito. Local officials had sought to reduce the fire risk by creating defensible areas through controlled burns of overgrown brush and creating fuel breaks, but their plans faced opposition.

The U.S. Forest Service [was sued](#) when it tried to create a six-mile fuel break and eventually dropped the project. The opposition from environmental organizations was out of concerns that they would affect "sensitive habitat." The Santa Barbara County fire chief is now calling for the [creation of a network of fuel breaks](#) to provide a frontline defense against future major fires, but these efforts also face pushback.

While common sense would dictate following the advice of these firefighting experts and taking steps to prevent wildfires, that type of thinking has been in short supply, based on Santa Barbara's experience. Even our Congressman, Salud Carbajal, still hasn't gotten the message. He opposed the bipartisan [Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017](#) that would have improved forest management efforts, and opposed another [bipartisan measure](#) to reduce the risk of power line induced fires.

In light of the threat we face, ideological opposition to fire prevention strategies needs to be replaced with pragmatism. Whether California's wildfires are the result of a "new normal" caused by hotter temperatures due to climate change, or if they are happening because of ill-conceived policies that led to poor land management, the only action under our control now is how we choose to manage our forests and open land.

That means serious steps need to be taken to reduce wildfire risks. Overly strict [laws have blocked responsible logging](#) and forest management while leading to out of control vegetation that fuels massive fires. The record drought and dry, hot temperatures haven't helped but we know what we must do to fight back.

Brian Dahle, the Republican leader of the state Assembly who hails from Northern California, sat on a board two decades ago that [predicted](#) the rise of megafires due to the build of vegetation growth in forests. Despite these predictions, land management and fuel reduction haven't been a priority. Just a [fraction of California's cap and trade funds](#), which are dedicated to reducing carbon emissions, goes to fire prevention activities.

A single large wildfire can emit so much carbon dioxide that it [wipes out](#) any savings achieved by the state's climate programs. The crusade to reduce emissions means nothing if fires continue to burn and the most cost-effective way to reduce carbon in the atmosphere is to stop wildfires from burning hundreds of thousands of acres at a time. If climate change is creating a new normal of huge fires as the progressives believe, then they should be making prevention a top priority for their environmental programs.

Given the risk of wildfires that overshadow much of San Luis Obispo County, local leaders need to come together with residents, fire experts and environmental groups to do everything in their power to practice responsible fire prevention and reduce the amount of fuel that could spread a future blaze. Santa Barbara has shown how politics can sometimes get in the way of fire prevention projects. We would be wise to learn from their example.