Word-Play as a Solution to Western Wildfires

The 2014 Western wildfire season got an early start with large fires in Washington and Oregon that left those living in Western Montana gagging on the resulting smoke that seemed to be continuously recycled through our valleys. As the summer progresses, we all have our fingers crossed that our own home-grown wildfires will not re-create the “nuclear winter” of thick smoke blocking out the sun at mid-day that we have had to live through in summers past.

Unlike hurricanes, earthquakes, tornados, and most floods, whose occurrence we recognize as forces of nature that we cannot stop, federal ownership of vast tracks of forest- and grasslands in the Western states provides us with a scapegoat, other than “acts of God,” for the wildfire threats we face.

The political folk wisdom is that the wildfire threat we face is due to federal mismanagement of those forest- and grasslands, largely caused by environmentalists’ misuse of environmental laws. Once that Western rural myth is accepted, there appears to be a simply solution to our wildfire problems: Change the environmental laws so that federal land managers can quickly get on with their desired forest management that, assumedly, would dramatically reduce the wildfire threat we face in the West. And Congress has been doing just that, led by a bi-partisan coalition of Western congressional delegations.

Not surprisingly, almost all of the proposals as to how to control wildfire on federal lands involve a major expansion in the logging of those forests. This conveniently links our primordial fear of wildfire with economic insecurity and job creation. We can save our
homes from fire while putting thousands to work at family-supporting wages in an industry that historically was associated with the original settlement of the Mountain West.

Such multiple-purpose logging, we are told, has even more attractive features: For instance, it will help improve our natural environment by “restoring” our forests to a “healthy” state.

Now comes the tricky part. Apparently our forests became unhealthy in the past due to aggressive wildfire suppression and widespread logging and grazing of public lands. It takes a little fast talking and hand waving to purpose, as a solution, returning to the very activities we are told got us into trouble in the first place. But in the world of politics, where only bumper stickers and one minute sound-bites, matter, such contradictions are easily obscured by simply relabeling “logging” as “thinning” or “forest restoration” or “hazardous fuel reduction” or “treating an epidemic of disease” in our forests and bringing them back to health.

Such word-play is not much of a solution to very real physical challenges, but there is usually an implicit or explicit appeal to science to justify this word-play. Consider a couple of examples:

*Folk science assertion number one:* Logging forests that are infected or may get infected by bark beetles will stop the spread of that infection and the resulting tree mortality: The problem is that bark beetles are always present. They have evolved with the pine forests. The outbreaks of pine beetle infestations killing millions of acres of trees were associated with changes in the external environment faced by both the pine beetles and the trees. Warmer temperatures allowed the beetles to survive winters and reproduce more rapidly. Drought and warmer temperatures weakened the trees, so that their natural defenses could not resist the beetles. Logging all forest with bark beetles would do nothing to modify the climate change that created that ecological imbalance. There is little or no
 empirical evidence that logging reduces tree mortality caused by beetles. Of course logging, with absolute certainty, does kill trees.

Folk science assertion number two: Logging our forests, we are told, removes the flammable material that otherwise would fuel wildfires: But commercial logging removes the least flammable trees, the larger and older trees and leaves behind the smaller more flammable trees and the wood waste associated with the logging. The reduced competition among plants allows brush and other vegetation to bloom. In addition the logging opens the forest canopy so that sunlight and wind can dry out material on the forest floor and allow fires to ignite more easily and move more quickly through the logged area.

More importantly, the primary cause of large, hot, forest fires is weather conditions. Hot, dry, windy conditions allow wildfires to sweep through almost any forested landscape with potentially deadly and destructive consequences for those trying to inhabit those forests.

This definitely is not to say that there is nothing we can do to protect human life and property in the face of wildfire. But that cannot be done by trying to “fire-proof” our natural forests by logging them. We can protect ourselves from wildfire by not inhabiting wildfire-prone areas just as reducing the habitation of flood plains and low-lying coastal areas can reduce the loss of life and property from floods and hurricanes. In addition, we can focus on how we construct and maintain homes in wildfire areas, just as we enforce earthquake building codes and special building codes on flood plains and coastal areas.

There are lots of things we can do to protect ourselves from wildfire. But misleading the citizenry for political gain by engaging, again, in a “conspiracy of optimism” about the multiple values that will flow to us all if we just open up more and more of our natural forests to commercial logging is not one of them.