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The Virus Complicates Fire Season

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THE last thing we need right now is another risk to worry about. But across much of the American West, wildfires should be a big concern as summer approaches. This is especially true in Northern California, where the winter of 2019-20 was exceptionally dry and has set the stage for a potentially frightening wildfire season.

To make matters worse, many of the preparations needed to manage the risk have been disrupted by the pandemic. Which is why, for the 25 million people in the American West who live in homes and communities that abut or blend into wild landscapes, now is the time to make these places safer.

This year, California had its driest February on record. Many parts of the state had no rain or snow in what is normally one of the wettest months of the year. This followed a wet 2018-19 winter across the West. Historically, a dry year following a wet one is a recipe for wildfire. The wet conditions support abundant growth of grasses, brush and trees, and the dry conditions convert that into the kind of cured, dry fuel that can erupt into the cataclysmic fires that have increasingly plagued the West in the past decade.

The dry conditions add urgency for the U.S. Forest Service, the National Interagency Fire Center, state and local fire agencies, and private landowners to prepare now. Some of the most effective preparations focus on fuel reduction. They include thinning, creating fuel breaks and undertaking prescribed burns to reduce excessive amounts of brush and trees. These controlled burns during the spring

and early summer are an especially cost-effective way to reduce the danger.

Spring is also a critical time for firefighter training. With the West's rapidly increasing wildfire risk, caused by climate change and other factors, we need not only a lot more firefighters but also firefighters who are trained to work under conditions that are exceptionally demanding and dangerous.

Understandably, but worrisome nonetheless, Covid-19 is complicating those efforts.

The potential erosion of the firefighter work force is a serious concern. States have canceled or postponed training for wildland firefighters. Many are emergency medical workers who are needed

Covid-19 has disrupted preparations for what could be a dire summer.

for Covid-19 emergencies. Other firefighter crews are made up of state-prison inmates; their ranks have been thinned by early release related to the pandemic. In addition, there is the risk that camps crowded with firefighters could spread the virus.

Planning for prescribed burns is always challenging, but it is especially so in 2020. Many fire agencies are moving ahead with these operations, but with the extra burden of social distancing and increased attention to managing the smoke that could exacerbate the conditions of people with Covid-19. Others are holding off.

As Gov. Gavin Newsom of California acknowledged this week, this is definitely not where we want to be, heading into an

ominous fire season.

But those who live in the risk zones for wildfires can do a great deal on their own to protect homes and communities, even as many places begin the transition to reopening the economy.

The most important step is to create and maintain a defensible space around homes. Detailed guidance on how to do this is available from the Federal Emergency Management Agency or state fire agencies.

In short, make sure roofs and gutters are free of dead leaves. Remove branches that overhang the roof, trim shrubs near windows and make sure no piles of combustible materials like lumber or firewood are around that could ignite from an ember. It's also important to remove dead vegetation, open horizontal and vertical space between plants and mow tall grass within 100 feet of a home.

On a larger scale, wildfire prevention, like fighting a pandemic, needs to be a community activity. It works best if all participate. Creating defensible space on your property will help protect neighbors. The old saying "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" is as true for containing a wildfire as it is for containing a pandemic.

After sheltering in place, we could all benefit from a little fresh air, exercise and the satisfaction of protecting ourselves from the fire risks we will face in coming months. Making your home and community safe from wildfires will save lives and livelihoods.

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