

Western Washington Is Sleepwalking Into a Wildfire Future

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Here's something we can likely all agree on: the forests of western Washington are incredible. In fact they are one of the reasons I moved here in the first place. There is something almost mythical about them; massive Douglas-firs rising through fog, cedar groves draped in moss, deep green ravines that feel untouched by time. For many people, these forests represent permanence. Stability. A sense that nature here is somehow insulated from the harsher environmental realities unfolding elsewhere in the West.

But before living in Washington, I spent years in California and the Southwest watching those assumptions fail in real time.

I lived in Napa during the 2017 firestorms and watched the Mayacamas Mountains burn. I saw entire North Bay neighborhoods reduced to ash overnight. I watched luxury resorts tucked deep within redwood forests - places that once felt unimaginably protected by their lush surroundings - destroyed by wildfire. Later, I consulted in areas impacted by the Paradise Fire and the Tubbs Fire, where the scale of destruction was difficult to fully comprehend until you stood inside it yourself. Entire communities erased. Hillsides blackened. Families displaced. Infrastructure gone. And behind nearly every conversation was the same uncomfortable realization: many of these landscapes had been managed according to assumptions built for a climate that no longer existed.

As an arborist, what unsettled me after moving to western Washington was not how different the conversations up here sounded, but how familiar they felt.

I heard many of the same beliefs I had heard in California years earlier, particularly in the North Bay and Napa Valley: that the forests are naturally too wet to sustain major wildfire activity; that active fuel management in ecologically sensitive areas is inherently harmful; that aggressive fire suppression alone can continue indefinitely without ecological consequences; and that historical climate patterns will remain reliable enough to protect these landscapes from the kinds of fires reshaping other parts of the West.

That is the part that should concern us. Because while western Washington is still climatically different from inland and coastal California, the underlying trajectory is beginning to look increasingly similar: hotter summers, longer dry periods, more fuel accumulation, more stressed forests, and growing tension between ecological preservation and wildfire resilience.

For generations, western Washington has comforted itself with a simple assumption: catastrophic wildfire is something that happens somewhere else. California. Eastern Washington. Idaho. British Columbia. Not here. Not in the damp evergreen forests west of the Cascades.

Historically, that assumption was not entirely unreasonable. Western Washington's maritime climate, consistent winter precipitation, and relatively cool summers created forests that generally burned far less frequently than the dry interior West. In many lowland west-side conifer forests, major stand-replacing fires historically occurred every 150 to 500 years or more. Some coastal rainforest systems may have gone centuries between large fire events. While drier prairie-transition ecosystems and Indigenous-managed landscapes experienced more frequent burning, much of western Washington existed under a lower-frequency fire regime compared to the inland West.

But "low-frequency" never meant "fire-proof."

And more importantly, the climate conditions that historically protected western Washington forests are beginning to change.

A Dangerous Parallel Emerging Across the West

Over the last century, much of the American West adopted a radical philosophy toward wildfire: suppress fires aggressively and minimize disturbance in forests viewed as natural or protected. In many ecosystems, that combination slowly altered forest structure. Frequent low-intensity fires disappeared. Dead wood accumulated. Dense understories and ladder fuels developed beneath mature canopies. Forests became increasingly primed for larger, more severe fire events.

Eventually, hotter temperatures, drought, insect pressure, and ignition sources collided with decades of accumulated fuel. The result is the megafire era now reshaping much of the western United States.

Let's be clear— western Washington is not Colorado or California. Its ecosystems remain wetter and biologically distinct. But the parallels are becoming difficult to ignore.

In many western Washington Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) areas, particularly Native Growth Protection Areas (NGPAs), greenbelts, steep ravines, and unmanaged urban forest corridors, fire suppression remains the norm. Realistically, it has to be. Few communities are willing to allow natural fire anywhere near dense residential development.

At the same time, active fuel management in many of these areas is politically, culturally, or regulatorily constrained. The result can be decades of accumulating dead wood, invasive vegetation, dense understory growth, declining tree vigor, and uninterrupted fuel continuity extending directly into neighborhoods.

Historically, western Washington's climate masked much of this risk. Cooler summers and reliable moisture prevented many fuels from becoming critically dry for extended periods. But climate change is steadily eroding that margin of safety.

The Climate Buffer is Shrinking

My concern is not that western Washington will suddenly transform into Southern California chaparral. My concern is that the region is increasingly experiencing conditions outside the range that many forests and management strategies evolved around.

Summers are becoming hotter and drier. Snowpack variability is increasing. Spring moisture is leaving landscapes earlier. Heat domes and extended drought periods are becoming more common. Even when annual precipitation remains relatively high, the timing of that moisture matters enormously.

Western Washington historically relied heavily on climatic moderation as a natural fire defense system. That defense may be weakening.

Strong El Niño years illustrate this risk particularly well. Historically, El Niño patterns often bring warmer winters and reduced snowpack to the Pacific Northwest. Earlier snowmelt and drier spring conditions can extend the seasonal drying period, creating more receptive fuels by late summer. If those conditions align with heat waves, easterly-wind events, and ignition sources, west-side fire danger can escalate rapidly.

The Bolt Creek Fire in 2022 demonstrated how quickly western Washington forests can become highly flammable under the right combination of drought stress, steep terrain, wind, and ignition.

Importantly, western Washington forests are still generally more moisture-buffered than inland western forests. But it's the trend line that matters. The region does not need to become California for wildfire risk to increase substantially relative to its historical baseline.

What Happens if Nothing Changes?

According to UW's Climate Impact Group, if western Washington continues managing many WUI forests and NGPAs under assumptions built for a cooler and wetter climate, several outcomes become increasingly likely over the next 50 years.

The fire season will likely lengthen. More fires will occur west of the Cascades in areas historically considered too wet to burn. Smoke events will become more common and more severe. Drought stress, insects, disease, and heat will likely increase tree mortality across portions of the region.

The greatest risk may not be annual catastrophe, but episodic disaster.

The most plausible future is not that western Washington burns every year like parts of California. It is that increasingly dry summers combine with decades of accumulated fuels until one severe wind-driven event exposes how vulnerable many WUI landscapes have become.

That risk is particularly acute where unmanaged forested areas directly interface with dense residential development.

And if adaptation continues to lag behind changing conditions, the eventual public response after a major fire may become reactionary and ecologically catastrophic: aggressive clearing, panic-driven policy, and poorly designed vegetation removal programs that undermine habitat and long-term forest health.

In other words, failing to adapt could ultimately produce both worse fires *and* worse ecology.

Adaptation: A Smarter Way Forward

Let's be clear, the solution is not clear-cutting western Washington forests. Nor is it turning ecologically sensitive areas into manicured parks. Healthy forests provide enormous benefits: wildlife habitat, cooling, stormwater moderation, carbon storage, slope stabilization, and psychological value to communities.

But ecological stewardship and fuel management are not mutually exclusive.

Western Washington needs a more adaptive and ecologically literate approach to WUI and NGPA management. That may include:

- Selective understory thinning to reduce ladder fuels while preserving mature canopy structure.
- Strategic removal of invasive species that create excessive fine fuels.
- Forestry practices that preserve habitat complexity while moderating fuel accumulation.
- Shaded fuel breaks near neighborhoods, evacuation routes, and critical infrastructure.
- Climate-adapted species diversity rather than relying solely on historical forest composition assumptions.
- Strategic pruning and canopy separation in high-risk corridors.
- Better emergency access planning in heavily forested residential zones.
- Integration of arborists, foresters, ecologists, and fire professionals into long-term planning.
- Ongoing monitoring of drought stress, mortality, and changing fuel conditions rather than assuming historical resilience remains intact.

Most importantly, western Washington must move beyond the false binary that forests are either untouched or exploited. Healthy ecosystems are dynamic systems shaped by disturbance, adaptation, and change.

What We Do Next Matters

Western Washington still has something many parts of the American West no longer do: time. We still have the opportunity to approach this issue proactively instead of reactively. We can learn from the mistakes made elsewhere and avoid waiting until catastrophic fire forces abrupt, fear-driven policy decisions onto communities that are unprepared for them. But doing that will require cities, counties, planners, regulators, fire districts, ecologists, arborists, and community stakeholders to move beyond outdated assumptions about what responsible forest stewardship looks like in a changing climate.

That does not mean abandoning ecological protections. It means modernizing them. It means acknowledging that climate resilience must now become part of ecological resilience. The conversation can no longer revolve solely around whether vegetation should be touched at all. The question needs to become how we thoughtfully manage these landscapes to preserve both ecological health and public safety over the long term. Because if western Washington waits until large WUI fires become commonplace west of the Cascades, the decisions that follow are far less likely to be measured, balanced, or scientifically grounded.

The goal should not be to turn western Washington's forests into sterile, overmanaged landscapes. The goal should be to ensure that these forests, and the communities built alongside them, remain healthy, resilient, and survivable for the generations that come after us. We still have the ability to get ahead of this problem.