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**The New York Times**

# *Climate Has a Role in Wildfires? No. Wait, Yes.*

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke laid the bulk of the blame for California's blazes on "environmental terrorist groups."

**By Henry Fountain**

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With his comments this week on California's recent spate of vicious wildfires, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke waded into a longstanding debate over how forests are managed.

Mr. Zinke and his boss, President Trump, also dismissed the impact of global warming on the fires. But the secretary later clarified his comments, responding "of course" when asked if he accepted that climate change was part of the problem.

In radio and television interviews while in California visiting with firefighters, Mr. Zinke acknowledged that fires had been getting worse. But he said what was driving this summer's severe blazes — including the Mendocino Complex fire north of San Francisco that is now the largest in the state's history — was "fuel load," or the presence of dead and dying trees that have not been cleared from forests.

In one interview, with Breitbart Radio, Mr. Zinke blamed "environmental terrorist groups" for the situation, saying their legal efforts had prevented the widespread harvesting of dead timber.

But John Barnwell, director of government affairs with the Society of American Foresters, said there was no single reason this summer's fires have been so severe.

“I have to respectfully disagree with Secretary Zinke and say that a multitude of factors contribute to the tinderbox conditions in California and across the West,” Mr. Barnwell wrote in an email.

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He identified “lack of management of overstocked stands, changing climate and weather patterns, and insect and disease as the primary drivers for these large, catastrophic blazes.”

*[Read about President Trump’s inaccurate statements on the wildfires.]*

In his comments, Mr. Zinke said clearing of dead timber should be allowed, and other methods should be used to reduce the risk of catastrophic fires, including small prescribed burns early or late in the fire season.

The issue of timber clearing in Western forests has simmered for decades. Selective thinning of some trees and underbrush — what is called “fuels treatment” — and prescribed burning have been supported by both Republican and Democratic administrations and environmentalists as necessary to improve forest health and reduce fire risk. But many environmental groups argue that aggressive harvesting of dead trees goes too far.

“Fuels treatment is important,” said Lynn Scarlett, a former Interior official in the George W. Bush administration and now a policy director with the Nature Conservancy. “But there’s a difference between fuels treatment and timber harvesting and clear-cutting.”

Mr. Zinke also dismissed the impact of climate change on the fires in an interview Monday with a Sacramento television station. “This has nothing to do with climate change,” he said. “This has to do with active forest management.”

Those comments earned him praise from Mr. Trump at a cabinet meeting Thursday. “Ryan, you’re saying it’s not a global warming thing; it’s a management situation,” Mr. Trump said.

Mr. Zinke later clarified that he accepted that climate change was a factor. But his earlier comments, and those of the president, drew condemnation from scientists and environmental groups. Philip B. Duffy, executive director of the Woods Hole Research Center, a climate change research group in Massachusetts, said the comments were “clearly and demonstrably incorrect.”

“Scientific research has shown that the enormous increases in fire activity experienced recently in the West are driven to a large extent by climate change,” Dr. Duffy said in a statement. “Simply put, climate warming results in longer fire seasons and larger and more intense fires.”

Ms. Scarlett said Mr. Zinke’s and Mr. Trump’s comments addressed only part of the problem.

“On the one hand it is true that fuels treatment remains an important part of reducing risks,” she said. “On the other hand that’s not the full picture, and climate does make a difference.”

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Henry Fountain covers climate change, with a focus on the innovations that will be needed to overcome it. He is the author of “The Great Quake,” a book about the 1964 Alaskan earthquake. [@henryfountain](#) • [Facebook](#)

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