

# Fools at the Fire

*By Timothy Egan, NYTimes, 8.7.15*



Credit  
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In the heat, in the still gloaming, we set up camp near a snowbank across from a glacier and a symphony of waterfalls. North Cascades National Park, a few hours' drive from Seattle, can always be counted on as a compress to the rest of the country's fever.

Then, out of the park a few days later, down the valley to the arid east, it seems as if half of Washington State is on fire. Smoke, devastation, ashen orchards of charred fruit, standing dead pines. More than 250,000 acres have burned in the largest fire in the

state's history, the Carlton Complex. About 300 homes have been destroyed. A small army of firefighters, at a cost of \$50 million so far, is trying to hold the beast in the perimeter, between days when the mercury tops 100 degrees.

With this kind of loss comes blame. It's President Obama's fault. Why? Because everything is his fault in the inland West, where ignorance rides the airwaves of talk radio. Amid the conservative cant, a great irony: People who hate government most are the loudest voices demanding government action to save their homes. Those flares will die down. What can't be so easily dismissed is what the fires say about an emerging American ethos of delaying long-term fixes for our major problems. Smart foresters had been warning for years that climate change, drought and stress would lead to bigger, longer, hotter wildfires. They offered remedies, some costly, some symbolic. We did nothing. We chose to wait until the fires were burning down our homes, and then demanded instant relief.

We have a Congress that won't legislate, an infrastructure that's collapsing, a climate bomb set to go off. We won't solve the immigration crisis even as desperate children throw themselves in the Rio Grande. Income inequality threatens to make a great democracy into an oligarchy.

The nation that built an interstate highway system, and cleaned up its filthiest rivers and most gasp-inducing air, has become openly hostile to long-term investment or problem-solving, says Paul Roberts in "The Impulse Society — America in the Age of Instant Gratification," a cautionary tale to be published next month.

"We can make great plasma screens and seat warmers and teeth whiteners and apps that will guide you, turn by turn, to the

nearest edgy martini bar,” writes Roberts. “But when it comes to, say, dealing with climate change, or reforming the financial system, or fixing health care, or some other large-scale problem out in the real world, we have little idea where to start.”

As an optimist, I was skeptical of Roberts’s master narrative. The Gilded Age was a binge of self-indulgence by the few. The Roaring Twenties were a bathtub gin party that never closed until bounced by the Great Depression. “Greed Is Good” Wall Street ruled the Reagan years and beyond. We survived. Tried to get better.

But the wildfires of 2014 provide fresh evidence of Roberts’s premise. Large burns in the decade through 2012 are five times more frequent than in the 1970s and early ‘80s. At the same time, the cost of battling those blazes has increased nearly fourfold since 1985; the federal government will most likely spend \$2 billion this year acting as the nation’s rural fire department. The agencies saddled with this duty don’t have the money. And Republicans in Congress recently blocked consideration of emergency wildfire funds.

Yet Western homeowners represented by those very Republicans are clamoring: Put the fires out, now! So federal agencies will have to borrow from funds that had been set aside for fire prevention in order to smother the fires this time. The government is expected to rush to the scene after any big natural disaster — the impulse society at work. But there is no urgency to fix, or try to prevent, the overheated planet.

The cost of not doing anything about the big picture, as numerous reports have documented, could be catastrophic in just a few years. With rising sea levels, bigger fires, and more lethal and powerful storms, you don’t need an atmospheric scientist to know which way that wind is going to blow.

We all share some of the blame; procrastination is part of our character of the moment. Still, if want to put a face on this inaction, you can look no further than the member of Congress whose district in Washington State is now choked by smoke and harassed by flames — Cathy McMorris Rodgers.

She is part of the leadership of a Republican majority that is hostile to the point of negligence on the basic science of climate change. Earlier this year, she complained that restoration work was not being done on 300,000 acres of the Colville National Forest (in her district) that are dying from beetle infestation. This is a huge problem. From Alaska to Mexico, billions of trees have died from an outbreak of bugs, “the largest and most severe in recorded history,” as the Forest Service called it.

The plague has been directly traced to climate change — with drought, stress and warmer winters making it harder for the trees’ natural defenses to fend off beetles. But the party of Cathy McMorris Rodgers will do nothing. It’s a hoax, this warming talk, until one of its manifestations is nipping at the cedar decks of her constituents.

This fall, California will burn. Already, there have been more than 1,300 fires there. And the first seven months of 2014 were the warmest ever for the Golden State. This, at a time of its worst drought in modern memory. When the fires race through that lovely landscape, with all the media attention to the here-and-now but little to the elsewhere-and-future, only a fool will be surprised.