

The Pack-A-Day Club, Reconsidered

Editor's Note:

This article was first drafted in October 2017 and published in January 2018.

Here we are eight years later...

The National Interagency Coordination Center has just released their projection: Every state in the West is expected to face an above-normal threat of wildfire this summer. See [the latest projections](#).

Updates to this article reflect what years of additional wildfire seasons, stronger science, and lived experience have made unmistakably clear: wildfire smoke is not simply a byproduct of fire. It is a recurring public-health crisis. This reality, is brought about by policy, habits, and institutional structures that continue to push more durable solutions down the road.

Other related articles In the Evergreen Library:

<https://evergreenmagazine.com/chemical-composition-of-smoke/>

<https://evergreenmagazine.com/wildfire-smoke-impacts-respiratory-health/>

Not Just The West

There was a time when wildfire smoke was treated as a seasonal burden mostly borne by rural communities in the interior West.

That is no longer true.

Today, smoke from large wildfires reaches deep into cities, across state lines, and into the lives of millions of Americans who may live hundreds of miles from the nearest flame. What many westerners have known for decades is now broadly understood: wildfire smoke is not simply an inconvenience.

It is a serious public-health hazard.

Smoke Is Not Just Annoying. It Is Dangerous.

The science is clearer now than it was when this essay first began to take shape. Wildfire smoke contains many of the same harmful pollutants found in other forms of combustion, including fine particulate matter, carbon monoxide, methane, nitrogen oxides, formaldehyde, acetaldehyde, and other volatile organic compounds. The smallest particles - especially PM2.5 - are the most dangerous because they travel deep into the lungs and can enter the bloodstream.

For years, many of us reached for a blunt comparison: breathing heavy wildfire smoke felt like smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. It was not a scientific formula so much as a way of describing the physical reality of living for days or weeks under dense smoke. But the science now gives us more precise language. We no longer need the comparison alone. We know that prolonged exposure to wildfire smoke can aggravate asthma, bronchitis, COPD, and cardiovascular disease, and can

increase risk for children, older adults, pregnant women, outdoor workers, and people with underlying health conditions.

Wildfire smoke is not compositionally simple. Depending on fuels, fire behavior, and burning conditions, it can include large releases of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, methane, fine particulate matter, methanol, formaldehyde, acetaldehyde, acetone, ethene, ethane, and nitrogen oxides - a reminder that what communities inhale during prolonged smoke events is not “just wood smoke” in any casual sense. It is a complicated and harmful atmospheric mix produced at enormous scale.

This matters because smoke is not just a byproduct of distant flames. It is often the most widespread human consequence of a wildfire season. Fires may burn in remote forests, but the smoke they produce moves into valleys, towns, cities, schools, hospitals, and workplaces. In many communities, it is smoke - not flame - that most directly shapes daily life.

That reality deserves to be stated plainly. Wildfire smoke is not merely irritating. It is not just an unpleasant reminder that forests are burning somewhere over the horizon. It is a complex chemical burden carried by the air itself, and when exposure is intense or prolonged, it becomes a measurable threat to public health.

In bad fire seasons, residents across the West have watched smoke settle in so thick that nearby hills, neighborhoods, and highways disappear from view. Under those conditions, the question is no longer whether smoke is harmful. The question is how long communities are expected to endure it, and why the country continues to accept such conditions as though they were inevitable.

In that sense, smoke has become one of the clearest ways the wildfire crisis enters daily life. Flames may burn far from town, but smoke closes the distance.

What was once framed chiefly as a forest-health crisis has become, unmistakably, a public-health crisis as well.

Sally Fairfax and the Danger of Reification

Sally Fairfax spent much of her career warning against **reification** - the habit of treating human-made institutions and arrangements as though they were fixed, natural, and beyond reconsideration. In plain language, reification occurs when we forget that policies, bureaucracies, and governing structures were created by people, shaped by politics, and sustained by habit. That insight belongs here.

For years, Congress, federal agencies, and the broader public have behaved as though the present arrangement of forest policy, wildfire funding, and land-management authority is simply the given order of things. It is not. It is a political construction layered over decades through statutes, regulations, bureaucratic divisions, court decisions, and annual budget bargains. Yet each fire season, instead of asking whether the structure itself is equal to the crisis before us, Washington makes another short-term deal and calls it progress.

That is reification at work.

We take a system that is plainly strained, fragmented, and often too slow for the problem it faces, and we treat its limitations as inevitable. We debate the margins. We rearrange authority. We negotiate another temporary fix. And in doing so, we push the larger solution farther down the road.

Fairfax's larger lesson was that institutions are neither sacred nor permanent. They reflect choices, priorities, and power. If they no longer serve the land or the public well, they can be reconsidered. They should be reconsidered. That is the deeper challenge in today's wildfire debate. The question is not merely whether this year's funding agreement, agency reshuffling, or legislative bargain will get us through another season. The question is whether we are finally willing to examine the structure underneath the cycle - and whether it is capable of supporting the long-term stewardship this ongoing crisis requires.

Until we do, we will continue to mistake temporary accommodation for reform, and continue to postpone the deeper institutional changes that a real solution demands.

A Crisis the West Has Lived With for Years

Those of us in the rural West have been living with this reality for years. There were days when people in Seeley Lake, Libby, Sandpoint, and communities across the Inland Northwest and northern Rockies could scarcely see down the road. It was not just unpleasant. It was dangerous. And it remains dangerous.

No serious person believes wildfire can or should be eliminated from western landscapes. Fire is a natural force in many forest types. But it is equally true that the scale, intensity, and consequences of many recent fires reflect more than nature taking its course. In too many places, we are dealing with a convergence of overstocked forests, decades of fuel accumulation, expanding development in fire-prone areas, stressed landscapes, and weather conditions that turn ignitions into disasters.

A serious discussion has to be large enough to hold all of that at once.

Beyond the False Choice

It also has to move beyond the false choice that has so often poisoned this debate. On one side are those who speak as if any meaningful intervention in a federal forest is suspect. On the other are those who speak as if every acre can be solved with a logging sale. Neither position is good enough. Neither is worthy of the complexity of the land itself.

What is needed is stewardship rooted in science, local knowledge, and practical experience: thinning where appropriate, prescribed fire where conditions permit, better protection of communities in the wildland-urban interface, faster response when restoration projects are sound, and stronger support for the collaborative efforts that have shown they can bring unlikely partners together.

Those collaboratives deserve more attention than they get. In many places, they have done the hard work of finding common ground where litigation, ideology, and bureaucracy have too often frozen progress. Without them, conditions in many National Forests would be worse than they are now.

At the same time, it is fair to say that some restoration projects continue to face legal and procedural delays that have real consequences for public safety and forest resilience.

That is not an attack on the rule of law.

It is an acknowledgment that endless delay is not a neutral act when forests are deteriorating and communities are choking on smoke. The burden of inaction is being carried by the public.

In the original version of this essay, several groups were cited directly. The record is what it is, and there is no reason to pretend those disputes did not happen. But the more important point now is larger than any one lawsuit or any one organization. We need a framework that rewards timely collaboration, careful review, and workable restoration - not a system that defaults so easily to stalemate.

(In the original draft, the groups cited were Friends of the Wild Swan, Alliance for the Wild Rockies, Native Ecosystems Council, WildEarth Guardians, Defenders of Wildlife, and the Center for Biological Diversity.)

Congress Cannot Keep Calling Delay a Solution

This a problem the Forest Service alone can solve. Congress has spent years forcing federal land managers to work inside a maze of competing mandates, limited capacity, shifting priorities, and a budgeting structure that has too often emphasized suppression over prevention. It is easy to blame the agency in the field. Harder, but more honest, is admitting that the larger policy structure has failed to match the scale of the problem.

And still the smoke comes.

It drifts into resort towns and mill towns, tribal communities and ranching valleys, urban neighborhoods and recreation economies. It empties golf courses, main streets, campgrounds, trailheads, and river corridors. It cancels family vacations, strains hospitals, disrupts schools, and undermines local businesses already operating on thin margins.

For years, western communities were expected to endure this quietly, as though smoke were merely the price of living near beautiful forests. That argument has worn thin.

People have every right to expect that forests are actively and intelligently stewarded, communities are better protected, and that public policies do not mistake paralysis for virtue.

Smoke Is Not Someone Else's Problem

This is not a partisan point. It is not an ideological point.

It is a practical one.

Smoke does not care whether its victims are Republicans, Democrats, environmentalists, loggers, newcomers, or multi-generation residents. It does not stop at city limits. It does not defer to anyone's politics. It simply settles in and does its damage.

That should be enough to change the national conversation.

So should this: wildfire policy is not only a forestry issue. It is a health issue, an economic issue, a public-safety issue, and a community issue. If we continue to talk about it as though it belongs only to land managers and fire crews, we are ignoring the larger cost.

What Stewardship Requires

The path forward is neither hysteria nor surrender. It is stewardship - active, science-based, locally informed stewardship that recognizes both the ecological role of fire and the unacceptable toll of unmanaged risk.

If Americans want out of the old "Pack-A-Day Club," they will have to pay closer attention to what is happening not just on the ground, but in Congress, in federal agencies, and in the public arguments that shape what can and cannot be done.

Smoke is the country's problem now.

What Will It Take?

The question is no longer whether wildfire smoke is harmful. Science and lived experience have answered that.

The question is whether we will respond with the seriousness this ongoing crisis requires.

If we do not, we are no longer dealing in uncertainty.

We are practicing willful ignorance.