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The coming firestorm

Will Angora fire be a prelude to wildfire devastation across the West?

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In a thousand dusty and brush-choked canyons, in tinder-dry forests redolent with the sweet scent of pine pitch, and on wind-swept grasslands all around the American West, disaster is brewing.

The flames and the dense pillars of smoke rising above South Lake Tahoe last month were merely a prelude to what is already shaping up to be another devastating fire season. In the days since the Angora fire was quelled, hundreds of other fires have erupted all over the West. The outbreak suggests a trend that has been accelerating for decades will continue. The trend is toward more, and increasingly ferocious, wildfires.

Few of us understand just how dire the threat to our lives and our property really is. We have forgotten, or we never learned, a harsh series of lessons from the late 19th and early 20th centuries in what were once the rich pinelands of Minnesota and Wisconsin. There, in a time before wildfire was really taken seriously, a catastrophic series of massive fires killed thousands and destroyed millions of acres of forest. The worst of these holocausts occurred on Oct. 8, 1871, when the town of Peshtigo, Wis., was overwhelmed by a firestorm of staggering proportions. Perhaps 2,000 people died. Then, on Sept. 1, 1894, two fires converged on the town of Hinckley, Minn., killing more than 400 people in a horrific catastrophe chronicled in my book, "Under a Flaming Sky." The Hinckley firestorm consumed more than 300,000 acres -- 100 times as much land as last month's Angora fire at South Lake Tahoe -- in a matter of a few hours. On Oct. 12, 1918, a series of unstoppable fires raged across the Cloquet and Moose Lake areas of northern Minnesota, killing more than 400 people.

In our modern age, we tend to think that we are immune to such disasters because we enjoy instantaneous communications, we have aircraft that can dump thousands of gallons of water or flame retardant on fires and we can flee fires in automobiles.

But we aren't immune. Large fires remain highly unpredictable in how they evolve. Bombers and helicopters are of limited use in the extreme winds that firestorms generate and feed on. And as the Oakland Hills fire of 1991 demonstrated, cars are of little use on roads jammed with people trying to flee a wildfire. And fire can easily outrun anyone on foot.

We live, in fact, in an age of increasing peril when it comes to wildfire. Between the beginning of 1960 and the end of 1965, wildfires consumed roughly 25 million acres in the United States. Between 2000 and 2005 the figure rose to almost 40 million acres, despite improved firefighting equipment and better spotting and tracking technology. Last year, a record-breaking 9.09 million acres burned between Jan. 1 and Sept. 30, a 166 percent increase over the previous 10-year average. Unfortunately, it's a record that's likely to be broken, and soon.

A convergence of factors is coming together to raise the chances that we will again confront a catastrophe of the magnitude of the historic Midwestern disasters. For one thing, more homes are being built on what firefighters call the wildland-urban interface, the borderland between urban centers and undeveloped country. As we take up residence in difficult-to-access canyons, on grassy slopes and in tall timber, we greatly increase the chance of mass fatalities when fires break out, as they inevitably will.

Additionally, and largely as a result of policies formulated after catastrophes like Hinckley and Peshtigo, we have removed fire from the natural ecology of our wildlands. We have suppressed naturally occurring fires so completely that over the past 100 years vast accumulations of highly combustible fuel have built up across our landscape. And finally there is the unquantified but increasingly critical role that global warming seems to play in spawning the kinds of conditions that are conducive to massive wildfires, particularly in the boreal forests of North America.

Whether we once again experience firestorms of historic proportions is largely up to us. Although lightning causes many fires in remote areas, wildfires are still seven times more likely to be caused by human activity than by lightning. And no matter how careful most of us are, there will always be the inevitable idiot with the firecracker, the careless camper, the motorist who mindlessly flips a cigarette butt from a moving car, the psychopath with a can of gasoline and a match.

If we want to avoid disasters, whether in the Tahoe Basin or in the hills above Los Angeles, we need to reduce the consequences of those kinds of inevitabilities. We need to restrict growth in fire-prone areas. We need to reconsider the policy of complete fire suppression and let controlled fires do their cleansing and renewing work. We need to allow environmentally responsible clearing of deadwood and brush. And we need -- now -- to address perhaps the most fundamental issue of all, the potentially catastrophic role of unchecked global warming.

If it comes, a 21st century conflagration will be formidable. Whether it roars down out of chaparral-cloaked hills to incinerate a suburban California village or races through the crowns of Ponderosa pines to surround a mountain resort town, a true firestorm of the magnitude of Hinckley or Peshtigo will move with extraordinary swiftness -- far greater than the people in its path can fathom. It will spawn hurricane force winds -- so strong they will knock down structures and carry flaming debris thousands of feet into the air. It will spawn fire whirls -- literally tornadoes of fire. It will throw spot fires far out ahead of its flaming front. And that flaming front may rise two or three hundred feet in the air -- a wall of fire that will destroy anything in its way.

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