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OPINION

CHAR MILLER: Fire inevitable, despite attempts to tame chaparral

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By CHAR MILLER / Contributing writer
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You didn't need to fly into Ontario International Airport this past week to know that Southern California's fire season had begun. But the view from 10,000 feet offered a unique perspective on how wildfires impact the region.

Descending through the Cajon Pass, my flight cut through a slipstream of smoke riding the strong westerly winds that sweep along the front face of the San Gabriel Mountains. The connection between the Southland's prevailing air currents and topography means that any fire burning in the Angeles National Forest will extend far beyond that fire's precise location.

That's true for the Reservoir and Fish fires that erupted on June 20 and have consumed more than 6,000 acres. Their reach far exceeds their physical size. Those living within the basin that extends from the San Gabriel Valley east to Riverside and San Bernardino could not miss the smaze hanging overhead, white ash drifting down like snow or an acrid burning in our throats.

This bitter aftertaste even penetrated the jet that brought me home the day the recent fires ignited. As it made its final approach, the pressurized cabin filled with the stench of burnt wood. A flight attendant had to calm out-of-state passengers by assuring them they weren't smelling engine failure but forest fires nearly 30 miles away.

Locals may have smiled knowingly at our seatmates' initial distress, but we are not any more discerning about another consistent aspect of fire season – how we talk (and argue) about wildland conflagrations.

For the U.S. Forest Service, CalFire and county firefighting agencies, these blazes seem to have a single cause: the density of what they call "fuel." Since the majority of our

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forests in the San Gabriel, San Bernardino and San Jacinto mountains are composed of chaparral, that "fuel" consists of such shrubs as ceanothus, sage, chamise, manzanita and related species. It is an indigenous ecosystem that when healthy grows thick, forming an impenetrable, clothes-tearing habitat that naturalist John Muir once praised as "thornily savage."

Fire agencies have never shared Muir's love for the prickly chaparral. Since the early 20th century, they have tried to get rid of it. Yet every attempt has failed to supplant the endemic biota; every effort to convert it to grassland has proved just as unsuccessful.

Its competitiveness has not stopped public lands managers from fighting back. Their latest strategy is arguing that chaparral poses an extreme fire danger, so much so that it must be cleared away by mechanical and/or chemical means. Huge machines called masticators chew up acres at a time; various herbicides are then sprayed to keep it from re-sprouting. For those who finger chaparral as Southern California's fire problem, shredding and poisoning it within the wildland-urban interface and deep in backcountry are the only ways to save life, limb and landscape.

Not so. The historical record indicates that chaparral wildfires can be large but are also infrequent; and ecologists affirm that neither the age of the forest nor its density determines when these fires will erupt or how they burn. Rather, chaparral fires are weather-driven phenomena: high heat, low humidity, Santa Ana winds and deep drought are the necessary preconditions for such fast-moving burns as the Fish and Reservoir - and every other significant fire in the region over time.

Fire, in short, is inevitable: that's the big picture, whether looking down from 10,000 feet or studying this region's fire history. Yet that is not what we tell ourselves whenever flames sweep up canyon and over ridgeline. Instead the agencies speak of battling enemy fire, and the media offer eye-catching images of soot-stained firefighters and orange-red fire retardant raining down.

To challenge this frenzied narration is itself a signal that a new fire season has arrived. Another is captured in the haunting words an acquaintance uttered while peering through a window at the smoke-filled sky: "It's like death outside."

Char Miller is a professor of environmental analysis at Pomona College in Claremont and author of "America's Great National Forests, Wildernesses and Grasslands" and the forthcoming "Not So Golden State: Sustainability vs. the California Dream."



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