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MY VIEW SAM HITT

WILDFIRE MESSAGING

The well-endowed Nature Conservancy recently hired two public relations firms to come up with “easy-to-follow, broad rules” that agencies could use when communicating their wildfire message to the general public. Curiously, these consultants recommended avoiding “using climate change as a rationale for action.” Never mentioned is the critical role that forests play in stabilizing Earth’s climate.

Instead, they urged officials to talk only about periodic cycles of drought that naturally occur in the arid Southwest — the same story used by climate deniers to shift attention away from fossil fuel use. We should all be concerned when a large organization with “nature” in its name comes across as joining climate deniers to promote a flawed fire policy.

The recommendation not to mention the warming climate was made to avoid alienating climate deniers, about one-third of those surveyed. But it’s also consistent with costly federal programs lobbied for by The Nature Conservancy to cut and burn millions of climate-moderating trees on national forests to restore “forest health.”

Instead of focusing on reducing fossil fuel use, the consultants recommend “pivoting to how to help.” They explain this means supporting efforts currently underway by professionals at the U.S.

Forest Service to intensively alter forests by intentional burning and clearing vegetation on a vast scale. It's assumed such major surgery is required to make forests healthy.

In allocating federal fire prevention funds, the consultants recommend not to “use language focused generally on equity” but instead talk about “communities with high risk and few resources.” When fairness and equity are not part of the conversation, the advantage that wealthier communities have over poor rural communities will likely get worse. Gated communities in scenic settings will continue to be better prepared for wildfire than poorer communities in need of grants and low-interest loans to achieve the same level of preparedness.

This disparity was demonstrated last year when hundreds of rural residents in Northern New Mexico needlessly lost their homes to wildfire when a fire intentionally started by the U.S. Forest Service, and advocated for by The Nature Conservancy, went awry near Las Vegas, N.M. Those homes would be standing today if federal fire policy prioritized public safety instead of costly schemes to make forests “healthy.”

The U.S. Forest Service now admits that wildfires seldom encounter the areas freshly cleared of fuels. Instead, flammable shrubs and grasses, like invasive cheatgrass, soon dominate those cleared areas. Without the cooling shade of a forest canopy, fire danger grows. Congress continues to pour billions into this failed approach to fire while every year more communities in the West burn to the ground.

A focus on public health, not forest health, would prioritize the importance of saving lives and property. An added benefit is that

fewer intentionally ignited fires would escape to burn down communities. Forest health is best achieved by letting the trees stand to remove and store atmospheric carbon needed to stabilize the climate. That way, we protect the vulnerable and inch closer to a climate-sane future.

Sam Hitt has been active in forest issues for more than 40 years. He founded WildEarth Guardians in 1989 and currently is president of the Santa Fe Forest Coalition.