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Trump Inaccurately Claims California Is Wasting Water as Fires Burn

By **Lisa Friedman**

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In his first remarks on the vast California wildfires that have killed at least seven people and forced thousands to flee, President Trump blamed the blazes on the state's environmental policies and inaccurately claimed that water that could be used to fight the fires was "foolishly being diverted into the Pacific Ocean."

State officials and firefighting experts dismissed the president's comments, which he posted on Twitter. "We have plenty of water to fight these wildfires, but let's be clear: It's our changing climate that is leading to more severe and destructive fires," said Daniel Berlant, assistant deputy director of Cal Fire, the state's fire agency.

He and others said that Mr. Trump appeared to be referring to a perennial and unrelated water dispute in California between farmers and environmentalists. Farmers have long argued for more water to be allocated to irrigating crops, while environmentalists counter that the state's rivers would suffer and fish stocks would die.

[For the latest updates on the Mendocino Complex Fire, read this story.]

The president first addressed the fires late Sunday, writing on Twitter, "California wildfires are being magnified & made so much worse by the bad environmental laws which aren't allowing massive amount of readily available water to be properly utilized." He also referred to a debate in forest management about the effectiveness of removing trees and vegetation as a fire control method.

On Monday, Mr. Trump expanded on his comments in another tweet, for a second time referring to water being diverted into the ocean.

The remarks came hours after the White House declared the wildfires a "major disaster" and ordered that federal funding be made available to help recovery efforts.

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Is there a water shortage?

California does not lack water to fight the Carr Fire and others burning across the state, officials said.

Mr. Berlant of Cal Fire declined to speculate on the meaning of Mr. Trump's statement that water was not being "properly utilized."

Asked about that line and the president's claim that water was being diverted into the Pacific, a spokesman for Gov. Jerry Brown, Evan Westrup, said in an email, "Your guess is as good as mine."

The White House did not respond to requests for clarification on Mr. Trump's statement.

William Stewart, a forestry specialist at the University of California, Berkeley, said he believed Mr. Trump was referring to the battle over allocating water to irrigation versus providing river habitat for fish.

That debate has no bearing on the availability of water for firefighting. Helicopters lower buckets into lakes and ponds to collect water that is then used to douse wildfires, and there is no shortage of water to do so, Cal Fire officials said.

California water regulators are preparing to negotiate how much water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta should flow to California's farms and how much should flow down the river and to the ocean to ensure fish have enough fresh water to spawn and hatch. The issue has long pitted environmentalists against the state's farming communities.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Mr. Trump took on the farmers' grievances in language similar to his tweets this week.

"You have a water problem that is so insane, it is so ridiculous, where they're taking the water and shoving it out to sea," he said during a May 2016 campaign rally in Fresno. "They have farms up here, and they don't get water."

Recently, California Republicans encouraged the Trump administration to weigh in on the issue, inviting Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to the Central Valley to discuss water rights in the state's agricultural heartland.

"It's a pretty big story, but it's got nothing to do with the fires," Mr. Stewart said.

Does removing trees control fires?

Mr. Trump raised another issue when he wrote that officials “must also tree clear to stop fire spreading.” Scientists and forest experts said the president was referring to a valid and continuing debate.

The timber industry has argued that “thinning” forests — removing certain trees to improve the health of the remaining ones and diminish the plants and underbrush that fuel fires — reduces the risk of wildfires. Republicans in Congress have sought to loosen environmental restrictions to allow more thinning. Democrats and environmentalists argue the practice will open the door to expanded commercial logging and threaten wildlife.

California already has policies in place to address wildfire risk.

LeRoy Westerling, a management professor at the University of California, Merced, who studies wildfires, said that Mr. Trump’s statement about fire-control efforts hit on an important issue, but that he wrongly placed the blame on California. Professor Westerling noted that while federal funding for lowering wildfire risk has been tied up in budget negotiations, California has allocated \$256 million this year.

That money is coming from a source the Trump administration finds troublesome: revenues from California’s program to reduce planet-warming greenhouse gases. Under its market-based approach for curbing carbon emissions, California sets a ceiling for the total amount of carbon that can be emitted. Companies are then required to obtain permits to release carbon into the atmosphere.

The Trump administration opposes federal efforts to address climate change.

California is “spending millions and millions of dollars on this while the federal government is sitting on its hands,” Professor Westerling said. “And all that money is being raised because we’re putting a price on carbon.”

What about climate change?

Scientists noted that Mr. Trump’s statement didn’t address the role climate change has played in creating a hotter and drier fire season. The president in the past has dismissed climate change as a hoax and his top cabinet officials have questioned the established science that rising global temperatures are caused by human activity.

Michael F. Wehner, a senior staff scientist at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, said it was not possible to quantify precisely the likelihood that climate change is having an impact on forest fires, as can now be done with other extreme-weather events such as heat waves.

And, he said, it's not easy to weigh how much of the problem can be laid at the feet of forest-management practices. However, climate change is making summers longer and drier, which expands the wildfire season.

“To dismiss the role of climate change on these fires is simply incorrect,” he said.

California fire officials on Monday said the Carr Fire in Shasta County had ravaged more than 160,000 acres while the Mendocino Complex fires grew overnight and had charred more than 273,000 acres across Mendocino, Lake and Colusa counties.

The White House's disaster declaration ordered federal funding be made available to help recovery efforts. “Assistance can include grants for temporary housing and home repairs, low-cost loans to cover uninsured property losses and other programs to help individuals and business owners recover from the effects of the disaster,” a White House statement said.

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