

# Forest Service chief to Congress: Climate change is responsible for these wildfires, you know

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Oh, good *grief*. At a hearing of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee on Tuesday, U.S. Forest Service chief Thomas Tidwell informed Congress that the budget cuts being handed down via the sequester are coming at an especially opportune time because 2013 is going to be a horrible season of ever more explosive wildfires. The [culprit behind these vicious fires](#), you might ask? Well, according to Mr. Tidwell:

America's wildfire season lasts two months longer than it did 40 years ago and burns up twice as much land as it did in those earlier days because of the hotter, drier conditions produced by climate change, the country's forest service chief told Congress on Tuesday.

"Hotter, drier, a longer fire season, and lot more homes that we have to deal with," Tidwell told the Guardian following his appearance. "We are going to continue to have large wildfires." ...

Climate change was a key driver of those bigger, more explosive fires. Earlier snow-melt, higher temperatures and drought created optimum fire conditions. ...

"This is a product of having a longer fire season, and having hotter, drier conditions so that the fuels dry out faster. So when we get a start that escapes initial attack, these fires become explosive in that they become so large so fast that it really limits our ability to do anything." ...

Huh. It's interesting that Mr. Tidwell's testimony focused on climate change as the main arbiter of the growing costs and damages wreaked by forest fires across the United States every passing summer, instead of the decades of egregiously counterproductive federal policy that directly created the dry, overcrowded, veritable tinderboxes scattered across the American landscape just waiting to blow.

The federal government, via the Department of Interior, the Department of Agriculture, et al, has been meticulously imposing restrictive land-use policies across the country for years — rules of which environmentalists are particularly fond, since they can often effectively ban most productive human activity from certain areas in the ostensible effort to protect some threatened species or other. This prevents a lot of the logging and grazing activities that would otherwise thin out forests; American forests' tree density has been on the rise, which in turn [puts a strain on the water supply](#) in a given region.

Water depletion from afforestation — the establishment of trees or tree stands where none previously were — is the unintended consequence of a wildly popular federal policy. For millenniums, fires set by lightning or Native Americans limited forest stocks to roughly a few dozen trees per acre. All that changed after the nationally terrifying Big Blowup wildfires of 1910, which led the United States to in effect declare war on wildfire. The government's

wartime-like tactics included security watchtowers, propaganda, aerial bombing and color-coded threat alerts. Uncle Sam trained elite Hotshot and Smokejumper crews to snuff out enemy flames. Congress annually funded the war effort with an emergency blank check, now \$2.5 billion.

Decades of heroic victories against fire led to gradual defeat in the larger war. Fuel builds up, and when it ignites, the fires burn hotter, faster and more destructively. More new trees compete for less sunlight, thinner soil nutrients and scarcer water resources. Native wildlife suffers. Insects and diseases spread faster. Public subsidies protect private properties at the wildland-urban interface. ...

First, the past century of fire suppression has resulted in roughly 112 to 172 more trees per acre in high-elevation forests of the West. That's a fivefold increase from the pre-settlement era.

While environmentalist groups continue to clamor for more big government as the supposed solution to environmental problems, the federal government has managed to orchestrate a century of awful policy that has turned America's public lands into increasingly dry fuel — and yet bureaucrats so often manage to overlook that fact when they are hurrying to pin our heightened fire-risk problems entirely on the politically convenient excuse of climate change.