

Curry: Are wildfires California's Katrina?

Contributed by Becky Curry
Monday, 07 July 2008

Fires continue to burn across California, with the massive blazes in Goleta and Big Sur getting the focus of the state's attention. California's firefighting capacities have been strained beyond their limits.

Residents, especially in Big Sur, have noticed just how few firefighters there seem to be for this blaze, as compared to previous fires in the area. As conservative demands for low taxes and budget cuts have helped slash available fire protection, residents in Big Sur increasingly feel they are on their own, though they appreciate the fire protection they have received.

The legacy of Hurricane Katrina – when nobody came to help New Orleans – has led some residents to refuse to evacuate out of a belief, evidenced by the facts on the ground, that if they don't protect their homes, nobody will.

This frustrating and chaotic situation is the direct product of conservative attacks on basic government services – they want people to fend for themselves.

One of the most high profile Big Sur residents who has stayed behind to protect his property is Kirk Gafill, whose family opened the famous Nepenthe restaurant in 1949.

As he and his employees stayed behind to put out burning embers themselves, he explained to a reporter why he stayed (from an AP report dated July 4): "We know fire officials don't have the manpower to secure our properties," Gafill said. "There are a lot of people in this community not following evacuation orders. Based on what we saw during Katrina and other disasters, we know we can only rely on ourselves and our neighbors."

Such do-it-yourself firefighting led one Big Sur resident to be arrested for setting his own backfires.

Another resident defended that person's actions on the Ventana Wilderness Society's forums, one of the main sources of community information on the fire: "We have been working on defending Apple Pie from this fire day and night since it started. We watched it grow over the coast ridge, down to the Big Sur River and up over Post Summit. The gov was not going to help defend the ranch even when our homes were about to burn. We didn't think they would either. But they didn't have any problem sending someone to arrest us. Our community just can't accept actions like this. If we didn't do what we did the ranch would be nothing but ashes. I say thank you to everyone who helped us and a thank you for all the firefighters, and pilots who TRIED to stop it from crossing the firebreaks to our homes."

Setting one's own backfires is a desperate and even reckless act – but those who do not believe their government will or wants to help them are likely to resort to desperate measures.

Meanwhile California does not have enough money saved for firefighting efforts. During the last decade, in every year but one, California has had to dip into reserves to pay for firefighting, but this year the SF Chronicle reports the gap is much wider.

"But in the just-completed fiscal year, there was a big gap between the actual cost of firefighting and the budgeted amount. The state had set aside just \$82 million for such emergencies, forcing it to spend more than \$310 million from the state's general fund cash reserves of \$858 million. California will have to continue dipping into its reserves until the Legislature and the governor approve a new budget for the fiscal year that began Tuesday ..."

California has come full circle. Hurricane Katrina became such a human catastrophe because conservative budget and spending cuts left New Orleans residents without adequate protection and aid. Californians in places like Big Sur, mindful of that experience and aware that firefighting is currently understaffed, are making increasingly risky efforts to try and protect themselves. Efforts to provide funding for adequate fire protection are opposed by conservatives who prioritize tax cuts over fire protection and who think schools and hospitals should be closed instead to pay for it.

California firefighting has already been badly neglected by decades of conservatism. It's time we rebuilt our public services so that individuals do not feel the need to risk their lives to defend their property.

Or this is our future as Californians?

The cult-like behavior of the tax-cutting members of the yacht-owning Republican Party and their holy relic of "I've got mine" Reaganism, an unreformed and badly outdated Proposition 13, are holding Californians hostage.

How much longer will Californians allow these radical conservatives to assault our public services and dismantle social protection from risk?

How much longer will we give the No. 1 job of government – protecting the people – to those who don't even believe in government?

I am sick of those who enable these selfish zealots as our state burns.

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