

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke published an [op-ed](#) today calling for “active management” of our federal public lands to reduce wildfire risk, and blaming “radical environmentalists who would rather see forests and communities burn than see a logger in the woods” for the prevalence and lethality of wildfires in the American West. Zinke’s op-ed is disingenuous, meant to mislead readers about how our public lands are managed. His call for “active management” is a thinly-veiled call for widespread logging, and not a good faith attempt to build support for improved fire management on our public lands. He surely knows better (and his remarks are [consistent](#) with his longstanding habit of undercutting the agency’s mission).

We already manage our forests intensively, through a [planning process prescribed by Congress](#). Forest plans and other federal land management plans in the Sierra Nevada take fire risk into account, & are periodically updated by the Forest Service and other agencies. Federal forest plans in the Sierra Nevada, in fact, are currently in the middle of [revisions](#), which, in their current draft form, take into account fire risk along with other factors. The Forest Service—which isn’t part of the Department of Interior, but is a unit of the Department of Agriculture—will finalize forest management plans with input from the public, scientists, and other land management agencies, though the Trump Administration’s approach to public lands calls into question whether the Forest Service will appropriately and lawfully balance scientific management and various competing values and interests as it finalizes the plans.

Management is not new on our federal public lands (other than designated wilderness areas, a small fraction of total federal acres). We’ve done it for decades. The National Forest Management Act of 1976 codified the requirement for every national forest to do active planning for multiple-use management and forest health. By law, [National Parks](#) and [Bureau of Land Management](#) managers (within Zinke’s Department of Interior) also must create and implement land management plans, actively managing the landscape.

Public land management planning isn’t perfect; it has to balance multiple uses and values, including human uses as well as ecosystems. Climate change is making it much harder, as is the legacy of prior mistakes. Secretary Zinke doesn’t even mention the impact of a century of fire suppression as the primary cause of wildfire risk on western federal public lands. He also doesn’t mention climate change in his op-ed, though he does mention the massive number of dead and dying trees from bark beetles, a [product of the impacts of climate change](#). More significantly, scientists have shown that [climate change makes wildfires more prevalent and more intense](#), and that it’s dramatically impacting our forests, and likely to result in [significantly reduced biomass over time in Sierra Nevada forests](#).

Scientists are looking at the problem carefully, and have recommendations. Their recommendations aren't simplistic "let's cut down more trees" like Zinke suggests. In fact, among the [recommendations](#) are "recognizing that fuels reduction cannot alter regional wildfire trends," prescribed burning, making development resilient to inevitable wildfire, & *targeting* fuel reduction adaptively.

Zinke is also wrong when he says "Logs come out of the forest in one of two ways: They are either harvested sustainably to improve the health and resilience of the forest (while creating jobs), or they are burned to the ground." There's another thing that happens to dead logs and snags (standing dead trees): they decompose & they support ecosystem health. Every ecologist and forest manager knows this. It's not a radical environmentalist idea.

This all doesn't mean we don't need to do *any* thinning; we will need prescribed fire, as well as some mechanical removal of undergrowth and smaller trees in targeted areas. We do this already, and we need more of it, in the proper locations. We also still have (and will continue to have) some logging in places where it's appropriate and legally permissible, but we need to recognize—as federal land managers already do—that widespread logging isn't the key to forest health.

But Zinke's op-ed features widespread logging as the key element of "active management," ignoring science and legal requirements, and at the same time blaming "radical environmentalists" for a problem that is fundamentally a product of a combination of past fire suppression and a changing climate. Zinke's idea that environmental advocates are in favor of dangerous wildfires and against forest management (and somehow have been running the show at federal land management agencies) is ridiculous & offensive. Everyone wants to reduce fire risk to communities. Creating a false narrative to support extractive industries, and making environmental advocates into bogeymen, helps no one. We need science-based solutions, and both scientists & environmental advocates are partners in that, along with hard-working federal land managers. Unfortunately, as demonstrated by Zinke's op-ed, the political leadership at the Department of Interior doesn't seem to be approaching these problems in good faith.