Photo credit: CAL FIRE

We know climate change is partly to blame. Are California's environmental policies regarding land and water management also to blame for the supercharged firestorm that has ravaged Los Angeles? It's not just conspiracy theories on social media or misguided news stories; that's the position of some congressional Republicans and President-elect Trump, who hold power over future federal aid to California.

The UCLA Emmett Institute's Denise Grab, Cara Horowitz, and Julia Stein weigh in on some of these dubious claims, half-truths, and outright lies.

Trump has accused Gov. Gavin Newsom of declining to sign what he referred to as a "water restoration declaration" aimed at diverting water from Northern to Southern California. As a result, he said, there was no water for fire hydrants or firefighting planes.

Cara Horowitz: There is no such "water restoration declaration" and never was. Instead, I suspect that Trump is alluding here to his longstanding complaint about California's approach to water management writ large, especially regarding the conveyance of water from north to south. Trump often complains that California sometimes reduces water

deliveries to certain agricultural users in order not to harm protected natural resources — as required, notably, by both federal and state law. But none of that likely has anything to do with why the Palisades fire hydrants ran dry, or why fire crews in Altadena dealt with similar strains to the water system. Our local water delivery system simply couldn't handle the intense and simultaneous demands for water, especially in the Pacific Palisades as that fire exploded across thousands of acres. The problem wasn't a lack of water per se; it was limitations of the infrastructure designed to deliver water from local supplies. As my colleagues have noted, many municipal water systems are not designed to handle the stress on water infrastructure caused by urban fires of this unprecedented scale.

Developer and former mayoral candidate Rick Caruso has said more brush clearance could have "significantly mitigated" the destruction. Elon Musk wrote that the "biggest factor" is that "crazy environmental regulations prevent building firebreaks and clearing brush near houses."

Julia Stein: What Caruso and Musk are talking about is mechanical thinning of brush. First, it's important to note that the Los Angeles Municipal Code already requires property owners to clear brush that might create a fire risk near their properties—and that these requirements have become more stringent in recent years. So contrary to Musk's claim, regulations are helping, not hurting, here.

Second, depending on the brush you're thinning, too much mechanical thinning can be a bad thing (thinning chapparal allows less fire-resistant invasives like mustard to take over, and too much thinning in general destroys species habitat). But smart vegetation management, particularly removing non-native overgrowth, can help, which is why local law requires it. To some degree, the issue of whether enough brush was cleared before these fires is a question of resources available to do the work — historically, as a state, we've spent more on fire suppression than fire prevention, and much of the prevention spending has occurred in Northern California, with less in Southern California.

But also important is how individual homeowners manage their own property. Los Angeles does have fire hazard reduction programs to enforce "defensible space" requirements around properties. And the state passed a law relatively recently, AB 3074 (2020), directing CALFIRE to adopt fire safety rules, often called "zone zero" rules, that would provide guidance about what should and should not be in the space immediately next to a house. That guidance was supposed to prompt homeowners to create a 5-foot "ember-resistant" zone that's free from flammable landscaping, but some people don't like that aesthetically, which is the likely reason the rules haven't even been formally proposed, let alone implemented, even though they are common sense. My view here is that brush clearance is

a necessary part of the strategy, but that folks who choose to live in fire-prone areas also need to take responsibility for managing their properties safely by implementing a buffer zone like “zone zero.”

Some senators like Ron Johnson (R-Wisconsin) have claimed California has failed to properly manage wildland, saying that California should return to earlier, 20th Century mitigation practices of leasing public lands to ranchers to graze cattle and sheep.

Julia Stein: There are 2 problems with this thinking: (1) The chapparal ecosystems that burned in these fires are truly far from what you would call ideal cattle grazing areas and (2) opening up sensitive ecological areas to grazing in general has very serious implications for the native species that live there and for biodiversity more generally. I think there’s now this tendency to want to focus on vegetation management as the answer to everything, when there are a lot of nuances: It matters what kind of vegetation you’re talking about, and where. And even if you are managing the “right” kind of vegetation, that’s still going to be disruptive to natural habitat, so it can’t be the only answer. The reality is that these fires are human-caused in every possible way, from the ignitions to the choice to develop residential neighborhoods in fire-prone areas. Communities that exist in those spaces need to learn to adapt to the reality that those areas will sometimes burn, rather than destroying ecosystems in an effort to stave off the inevitable. That means changing the materials used when rebuilding and changing landscaping, but also ensuring that communities are well-prepared to deal with emergency situations, like evacuations, when they are needed.

Rep. Ronny Jackson (R-Texas) said disaster aid should come “in conjunction with some reforms” and that California had prioritized taxpayer dollars “on all kinds of crazy, woke agenda items that they’ve had and green energy stuff” over fire-fighting funds.

Cara Horowitz: There are a few potential responses to the idea that federal aid for disasters should be conditioned on California changing its democratically enacted state laws to fit the current federal administration’s policy preferences. First, it should go without saying that federal aid is intended to help people and communities recover from the immediate and devasting effects of events like these fires. Holding aid hostage to serve political goals slows the process down and threatens to rob ordinary folks of the help that they desperately need, from a system they paid into and now depend on for quick relief. There has never been a political litmus test in this country for federal disaster aid and creating one would undermine the very idea of pooling risks. Imagine how this would play out if applied to red states and Democratic administrations, for example. Should President

Biden have withheld hurricane relief from Florida until the state improved its climate policies or upgraded its building codes? The very idea is abhorrent, when families of all political stripes are in desperate straits. What has our community come to if we pledge to help only those who agree with us politically?

Second, it's quite rich for right-leaning federal politicians to suggest that Californians should receive federal disaster aid for climate-worsened fires only if the state backs off of its policies to limit climate change. It's clear that climate change makes fires like these much worse and more costly, as well as hurricanes, floods, and other forms of disaster. The appropriate fiscal (and moral) response to these worsening risks is to try to reduce them by tackling climate change at its source. California's approach to climate change reduces risks; following Rep. Jackson's approach would, conversely, make us all poorer and less safe.

Julia Stein: I'll also add that the idea that California has prioritized so-called "woke" spending over firefighting is just not true. There have been massive wildfire packages in the state budget for multiple years running. Last week's budget announcement reupped wildfire spending, in particular highlighting $380 million in one-time spending on helicopters and air tankers, and then the Governor doubled down on that commitment Monday by proposing $2.5 billion for wildfire response and prevention efforts, which Democrats in the Legislature confirmed will be introduced in a separate budget bill from existing special session "Trump-proofing" legislation. Two points there: First, California has and continues to expend significant state resources on suppressing and preventing wildfires. Second, unlike what's happening at the federal level, California Democrats are depoliticizing wildfire funding by decoupling it from Trump resistance efforts.

Some critics have suggested that states like California, especially Los Angeles County, shouldn't keep getting "bailed out" by federal disaster funding because it creates a "moral hazard." Does LA receive more in aid than it contributes in taxes?

Julia Stein: California has historically been, and I believe continues to be, a "donor state" to the federal government, meaning it gives more — and often a lot more — than it gets back. In 2022, for example, California contributed $83 billion more in taxes than it received from the federal government, according to Rockefeller Institute of Government analysis. As others have noted, IRS data from the 2021 tax year shows that LA County residents filed tax returns owing a cumulative $20 billion — more than most states. And I'll note that lots of red states received FEMA aid this year (North Carolina, Florida, etc.). This is part of the reason we all pay federal taxes, and we all pay those taxes regardless of whether we agree with the politics of the reigning party, so federal disaster aid shouldn't be conditioned on

political fealty.

California policymakers, some say, have forced utilities to spend money on wind and solar projects — money that could have otherwise been spent on fireproofing power lines.

Denise Grab: In recent years, California's utilities have spent tens of billions of dollars on fireproofing power lines. Since the 2018 Camp Fire and PG&E's bankruptcy, the state's three major investor-owned utilities have dramatically increased spending to prevent wildfires caused by their equipment. The states' three biggest utilities spent $20.7 billion on wildfire prevention between 2020-22 and are projected to spend $26.2 billion between 2023-25. This significantly exceeds the amount the utilities spend on clean energy procurement (about $5.0 billion per year in 2023) and infrastructure for transportation electrification (about $2.6 billion authorized cumulatively). It's unfortunately not possible to eliminate all risk from electrical equipment, and the safest approaches are incredibly expensive (undergrounding electrical lines costs about $3 million per mile), with the costs being borne by ratepayers. The utilities are already taking tremendous strides to prevent tragedies like these.

Some news articles have focused on fears that the electric vehicles encouraged by California policies could be less reliable than gas-powered cars during a wildfire disaster and evacuation.

Denise Grab: Severe disasters of all types—from wildfires to earthquakes to hurricanes—can all significantly disrupt infrastructure. EV charging stations are hardly the only ones affected by power outages. In fact, gas stations need electricity to run their pumps, so they typically must shut down during power outages. Earthquakes, hurricanes, and floods can all disrupt gasoline transport and refining, which can lead to crippling gas shortages following disasters. After Superstorm Sandy in New York & New Jersey, it took months for the gasoline supply chain to fully recover. EVs may actually be more resilient in certain types of disasters than gas vehicles — if a driver has access to a solar panel with battery storage, she can recharge indefinitely, regardless of the length of a power outage. Meanwhile, when a gas car is eventually able to fuel up again, it will be burning fossil fuels that we know are making disasters like wildfires, hurricanes, and floods more frequent and more severe.

Have local zoning and building codes played a contributing role in the severity of

these fires?

Julia Stein: Zoning played a role, but I wouldn't identify it as the reason the fires were so severe. Local zoning has allowed neighborhoods to grow in fire-prone areas, which puts more people at risk when fire occurs. The role of building codes is a bit more complex —California does have strong building code regulations, which local governments are required to follow, to ensure that new construction is fire-safe. But the neighborhoods that burned in these fires contained many older structures that were not subject to the newer requirements.

I do think it's worth reiterating that these conditions — the confluence of extremely high winds, amount of vegetation given prior wet winters, and dryness of vegetation given the lack of precipitation this winter — were unique, so under other conditions we might have seen some homes in these areas burn but not to the degree that they did. In other words, we've set the stage for some risk of losing life and property to wildfires by choosing to allow for development in fire-prone areas. But I'm not sure anyone anticipated the unparalleled degree of that loss under extreme conditions, even though it was, of course, possible. Unfortunately, what we previously considered to be extreme conditions—especially when it comes to the vegetation part of this equation—are becoming more normal due to climate change, which means that we all need to adjust how we think about the risk of loss in these areas.

Loosening state environmental reviews and local permitting reviews, as the Governor and LA officials have done, could speed up the process of rebuilding, but could it have any downsides for protecting against future fires?

Julia Stein: I completely understand the desire to speed along the rebuilding process, with so many individuals displaced from their homes and given the realities of the already incredibly tight housing market in Los Angeles. In the Palisades in particular, new construction usually must contend with both environmental review and Coastal Commission review, which extends the timeline to build. The Governor's Executive Order suspends those processes for projects that won't exceed 110% of the height and footprint of what was there (legally—illegal structures don't count) before the fires—although there are existing exemptions from these processes to cover this kind of rebuilding, so the Governor's order really just clarifies existing law. The EO also asks for recommendations about suspending certain portions of the Building Code that might otherwise apply. And it directs the State to work with local governments to find other ways to speed the rebuilding process along.

In practice, this all means we may rebuild communities that look similar to what was there

before; some structures may even have a slightly bigger footprint. Indeed, that's happened in the past: In some cases, slightly larger homes were rebuilt after houses burned in the Eaton Canyon area back in 1993. While environmental review processes slow things down, they also represent opportunities to think critically about how we rebuild. Here, we'll be leaving those considerations squarely in the hands of property owners, who may be most concerned about rebuilding quickly. For example, environmental review processes present an opportunity to consider how planned development interacts with the availability of emergency services. In the absence of a formal process to consider those questions, individual property owners will need to apply lessons learned from these events when they build back.

Property owners will have opportunities to think about building back differently. Taking the Palisades as an example: recently enacted state laws allow for construction of ADUs and duplexes on single-family lots, and parts of Palisades Village were already zoned for apartment dwellings. You could, then, imagine parts of the Palisades becoming denser, and potentially more affordable, than they were before the fires. Of course, the idea of denser development in that area (which some community members may not want anyway) is in tension with risks posed by its location in the wildland-urban interface. A key question with any kind of rebuilding will be how to mitigate future risk—which will make adherence to fire-safe Building Code requirements and the maintenance of defensible space paramount.

These fires have shown us that the risk to residential neighborhoods in certain parts of Los Angeles is very real and could easily spread even to areas we have not traditionally thought of as being in great danger from fire. As communities rebuild, they shouldn't forget that.