There's a lot of news coverage about the wildfires on the West Coast right now, and rightly so. But with that news coverage comes a lot of commentary, some of which might lead us down the wrong policy path. I want to highlight an example from the New York Times opinion page, not because it is the most egregious example, but because the Times is particularly influential with a range of policy and intellectual elites who might take what the piece says seriously.

The piece, "When Living in California Means Fearing the Outdoors," is by a staff opinion writer at the Times, and it discusses how much of an impact on people's lives the wildfires in California over the past few years have had, with a particular focus on the writer's personal experiences. Overall, the piece is fairly apocalyptic in its tone, though the impacts the author notes are serious and have had real negative effects on many people's lives. In it, the author makes this statement, in emphasizing how extreme the wildfire smoke has been in California over the past few years:

> I've lived in the Bay Area for nearly 30 years, but only since 2017 can I remember experiencing periodic episodes of bad air quality.

The author's point is that this recent change in air quality highlights the abnormality of the recent changes in California, changes that she primarily connects to climate change.

The problem here is that it is most likely that, from a long-term historical perspective, it's the past thirty years in California that have been abnormal, at least from a fire and smoke perspective. Prior to European settlement, one researcher estimated that almost 4.5 million acres a year burned in California. To put that in perspective, last year about 4.4 million acres burned in California. In other words, from a historical perspective, the fires last year that the opinion writer finds so unacceptable and abnormal, were actually quite normal, at least measured by area burned. It is the fire suppression that was imposed as state and federal policy in the 20th century that is so historically abnormal, and gave the writer the clear skies that she remembers from the past thirty years.

Of course, it's a little more complicated than just comparing the total acres burnt across the years. More frequent burning (as occurred prior to fire suppression in the 20th century) likely would lead to less severe or less intense fires, which in turn

might mean that the same amount of area burnt would produce less smoke than we had in 2020. It's also possible that more frequent burning and less intense fires might make it easier for us to control or contain fires, such that they would be less likely to burn buildings and towns, like the Camp Fire burned Paradise in 2018. And if fires are less likely to burn buildings and towns, they may be also less likely to produce toxic smoke that poses significant health risks.

But while there are important ways in which fires now are different from hires 150 years ago, nonetheless, there were a lot of fires, and presumably a lot of smoke. One difficult question is how we manage the following dilemma: Landscapes in California will burn, whether we want them to or not. The general consensus among fire scientists is that more fire on the landscape is crucial to reducing fire hazards overall, and probably also reducing the volume and toxicity of smoke when it does occur. But that means we will have to adjust to having at least some smoke in the air on a regular basis in California.

Yes, climate change is a crucial contributor to the wildfire crisis on the West Coast. It is making the wildfire situation worse, and it could even drive wildfire levels above levels from before the twentieth century. But even if we could wave our hands and undo the impacts of climate change on our forests, we would still be faced with a serious wildfire crisis caused by a legacy of fire suppression. Addressing that legacy will require at least some more smoke in the air. I fear that perspectives like this opinion piece in the Times make the public less, not more likely, to understand that.