

Editorial: California's fire problem is in our collective backyards

By the Editorial Board

Fire has a tipping point in hot, dry weather. As the relative humidity drops – 22 percent is the magic number, according to fire officials – benign situations can morph into catastrophes.

A car with a hot engine parked near some dead brush, barbecue coals tossed into the trash, even a lawnmower hitting a rock during a California [fire season](#) can set off a conflagration. Three years of drought have just upped the ante.

Just last week in Orange County's Silverado Canyon, a jerry-built garden fence made out of metal sheeting got so hot that it touched off a 1,600-acre brush fire.

Californians tend to think of this as a rural problem. It isn't. This year's fire fear isn't just about [Pollock Pines and Weed](#).

Right here in the capital, the scenic, 23-mile [American River Parkway](#) – a model for parkways across the nation – [has lost nearly a tenth of its acreage](#) so far this year to explosive wildfires in the heart of the city. The Cal Expo fire alone consumed 160 acres on July 4, in relative humidity that was just around 22 percent.

Sacramento County Regional Parks Director Jeff Leatherman has counted 36 fires so far this year in the county park system, all but one on the parkway. The number is lower than last year, he says, but the acreage burned is far bigger because of the drought – about 350 acres so far this year, compared to about 250 acres last year.

Like the infernos in Siskiyou and El Dorado counties – and, really, across California – Sacramento's blackened backyard should be a call to action. Though it's too soon to know what's behind the most recent disasters, state fire officials say humans cause the vast majority of fires in California.

This is especially true on the parkway, where an estimated 8 million visitors per year come to recreate by the river, typically under the harried watch of less than a half-dozen rangers.

Though staffing has gradually improved since two years ago, when [budget cuts](#) nearly halved enforcement levels, Leatherman says he has only 21 rangers this year to patrol the entirety of the county park system.

New ordinances limiting smoking to paved areas and barbecuing to picnic spaces promise to be helpful. But under these incendiary conditions, this enforcement isn't enough.

One modest proposal for the short term? Empower the community to report [fire hazards](#) along the parkway, the way municipalities have encouraged the public to report overwatering.

The county parks website, www.regionalparks.saccounty.net, has both a number to call, (916) 875-PARK, and a [link that users can click](#) to report illegal campsites and other issues, but both could use more publicity.

Longer term, the parkway is crying out for leadership and comprehensive planning, from the homeless encampments along the river that, with conditions so dry, are tragedies waiting to happen, to the need for money to restore the [burn areas](#) and maintain fire breaks.

It's unfortunate that state lawmakers, during their water bond negotiations, ended up stripping \$25 million for the parkway before placing the bond on the November ballot. That money could have bought a lot of fire mitigation.

But what's done is done. We can pass the word in the meantime: Be extra-careful this [fire season](#). Beware the tipping point.

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