

After this year's wildfires, California must spend to manage forest health

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Commentary

After this year's wildfires, California must spend to manage forest health

Robert Dugan
Dec 20, 2020



Flames from the Glass Fire consume a vineyard building in St. Helena, Calif., on Sunday, Sept. 27, 2020. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

Noah Berger

Robert Dugan



he uncontrolled wildfires that raged across California this year devastated lives, homes, forests and entire watersheds. We set a dubious record for most acres burned in a single year: **4.1 million** and counting.

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It takes a long time to recover from such intense fires. In 2014, the **King Fire** burned 97,000 acres of vital American River watershed in Northern California, and we're still managing the consequences.

As representatives of urban and rural communities in this watershed, we appreciate that our lives are interconnected by the effects of wildfire. We understand how uncontrolled fire in our headwater forests can trigger cascading negative impacts on our water supplies, environment, recreational resources and economy – from the Sierra foothills to Sacramento's urban core into the Delta and beyond. We also know that the way we have historically managed our forests must change.

Today, millions of acres of forest, too crowded with trees and brush, are primed for catastrophic fire with little or no resilience to accommodate our changing climate. For this, we can blame last-century practices of extinguishing every forest fire as rapidly as possible. Lightning-caused fires and burning practices of indigenous people, which mitigated the risk of mega-fire, were stopped in the early 1900s. This allowed underbrush and small trees to crowd the park-like spaces between big trees that once defined our forests.

Forests can again function as they did historically and be more resilient to climate change, if Californians make several major shifts:

Local agencies must take the lead on forest restoration efforts. State and federal agencies can provide vital money and technical support. But the pressure to act must arise from residents, elected officials and conservation organizations in fire-threatened watersheds. Also, each of us needs to accept that small-scale, controlled fires are a natural condition in California. After all, historical accounts tell us that smoky skies in the late summer



We must support more funding for forest thinning and prescribed fire. Case in point: **After this year's wildfires, California must spend to manage forest health** The King Fire turned sections of the American River watershed into a virtual moonscape. Later, tons of ash, logs and soil eroded into hydropower and water supply facilities owned by **Placer County Water Agency**, threatening storage capacity and water quality for not just our Sacramento region but the Valley and Southern California as well.

Ever since, the Placer County Water Agency, Placer County, The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Forest Service and other partners have progressed on a 20,000-acre forest restoration project at French Meadows Reservoir, a vital water storage facility on the American River's Middle Fork. The project's goal is to use small, prescribed fires to eliminate overcrowded trees and brush that could stoke an inferno. Getting there has required six years of planning and hard work to mechanically remove undergrowth – using saws and tractors – so that a prescribed burn could occur safely.

Ultimately, we estimate the total project will cost \$18 million. That's a bargain when considering that federal officials spent \$117 million fighting the King Fire in 2014 and the countless tons of carbon that was released into the atmosphere.

Much more is needed statewide to address the tinderboxes like French Meadows that exist throughout California – **up to \$10 billion according to forest health experts**. Gov. Gavin Newsom and the Legislature were unsuccessful in their attempts earlier this year to boost funding for forest health projects. It's imperative that funding succeed in the year ahead.

That may require broad public support for a bond measure – your support – for the many public benefits these projects could yield. For example, restoring the natural, open condition of our forests is more accommodating for recreation and native species. Remaining trees can grow bigger, making them more resistant to fires. And avoiding catastrophic fires prevents pollution caused by massive carbon release, post-fire storm runoff and sediment flows that shrink capacity in downstream reservoirs and impact cold water ma



The fires of 2020 showed all of us how daily life is affected by uncontrolled wildfire. After this year's wildfires, California must spend to manage forest health Our long summer of record heat, deadly **wildfires** and smoky skies may have left many Californians feeling hopeless about the state we cherish. But the future is actually very bright, if we turn our focus to the forests.

WATCH NOW: FIREFIGHTERS RECORD DRIVE THROUGH INTENSE WILDFIRE

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Lisa Benson

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Clay Bennett cartoon



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Chattanooga Times Free Press Bennett

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Jack Ohman editorial cartoon

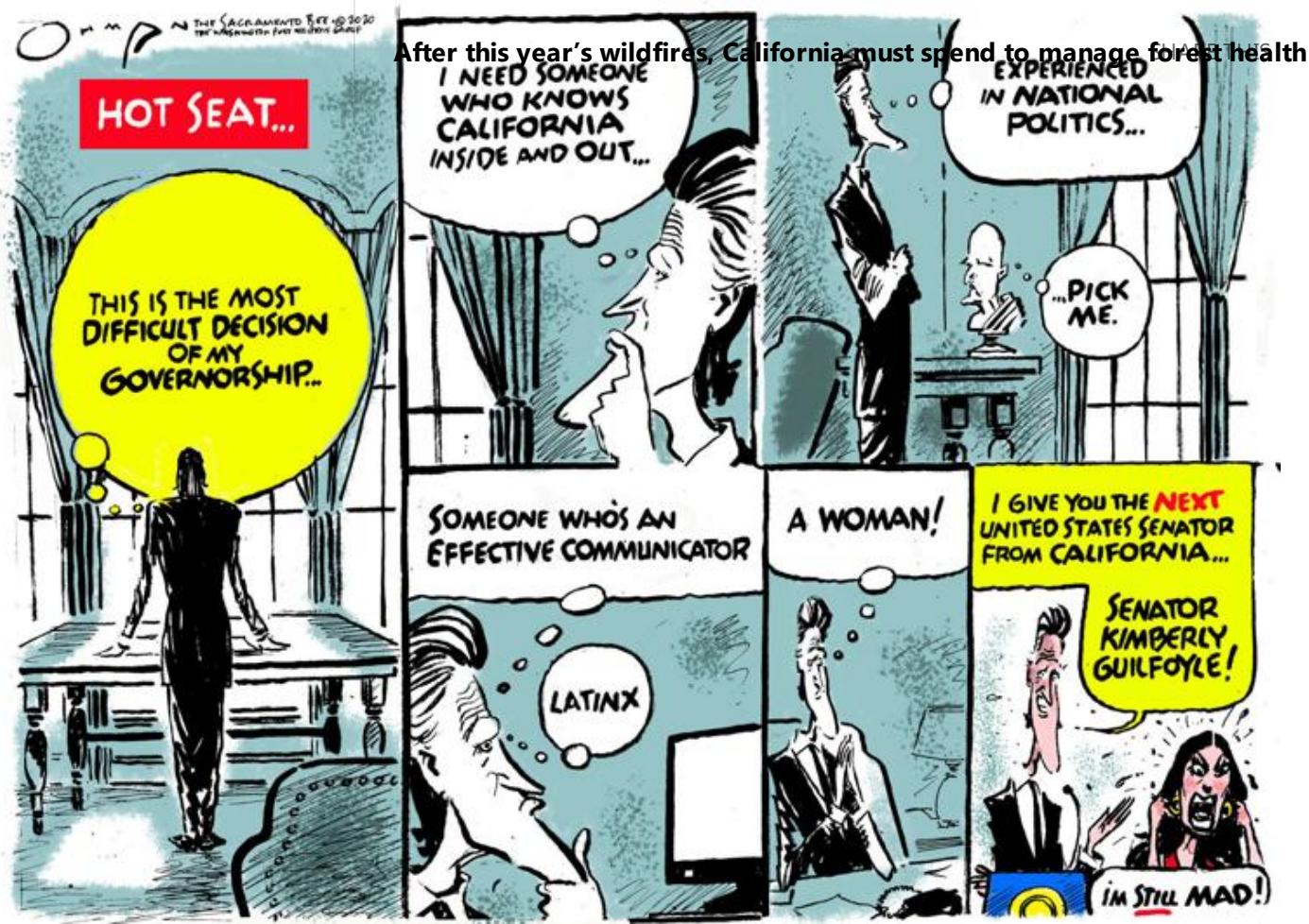




Jack Ohman

Jack Ohm

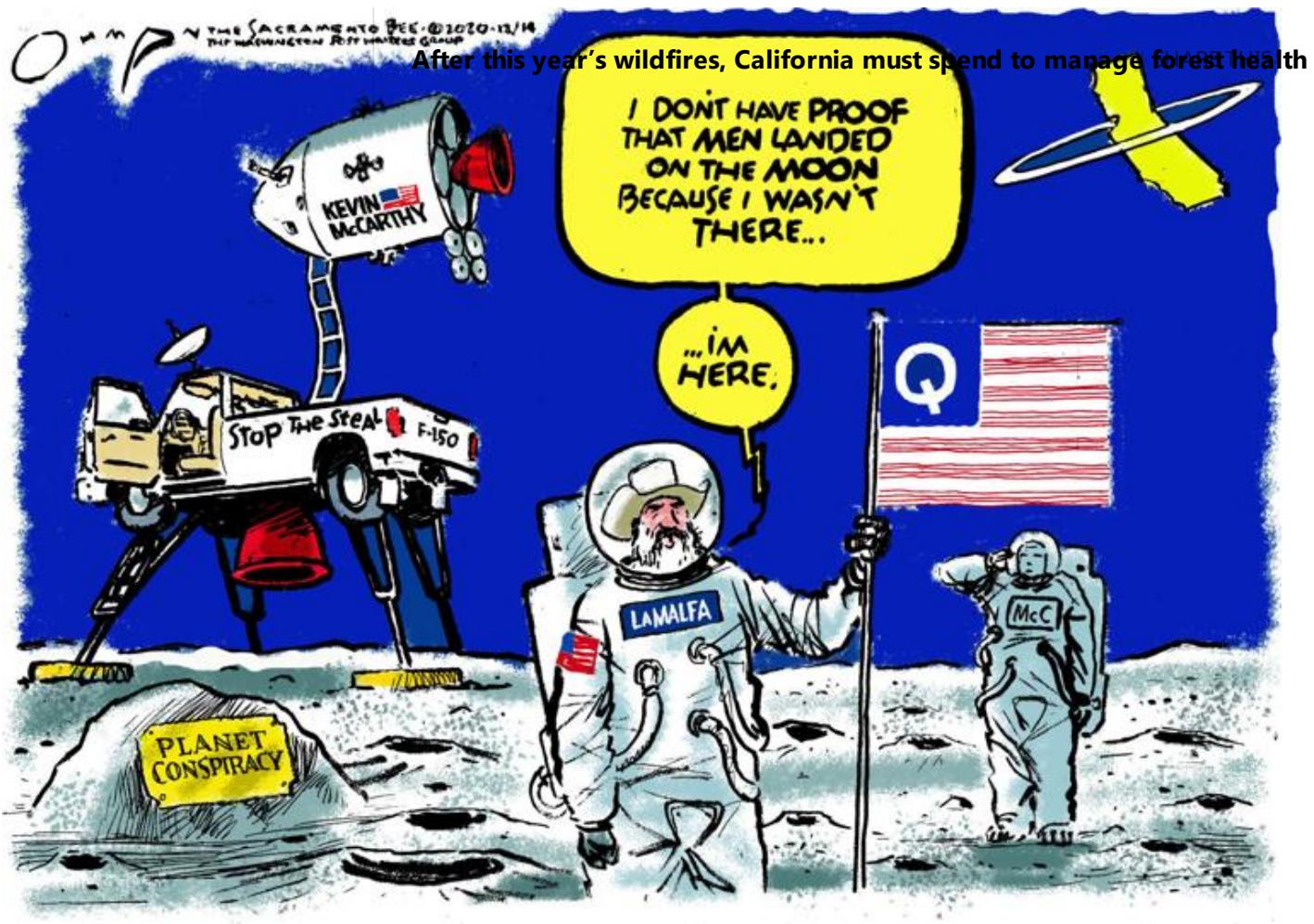




Jack Ohman

Jack Ohman, editorial cartoon



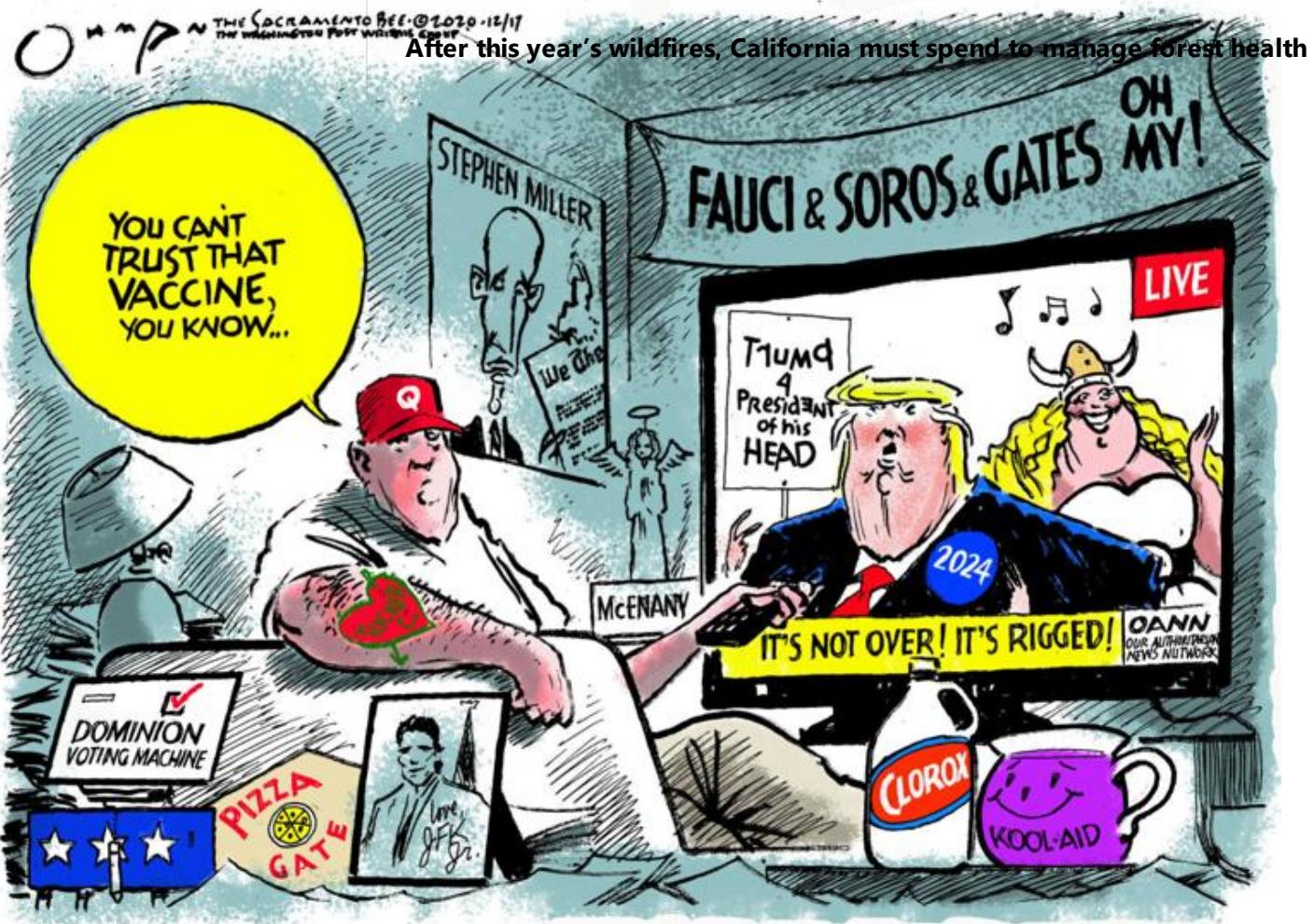


Jack Ohman, Sacramento Bee

Jack Ohman

Jack Ohm





Jack Ohman, Sacramento Bee

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Jack Ohman

Jeff Danzi



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You Can't Be Too Careful



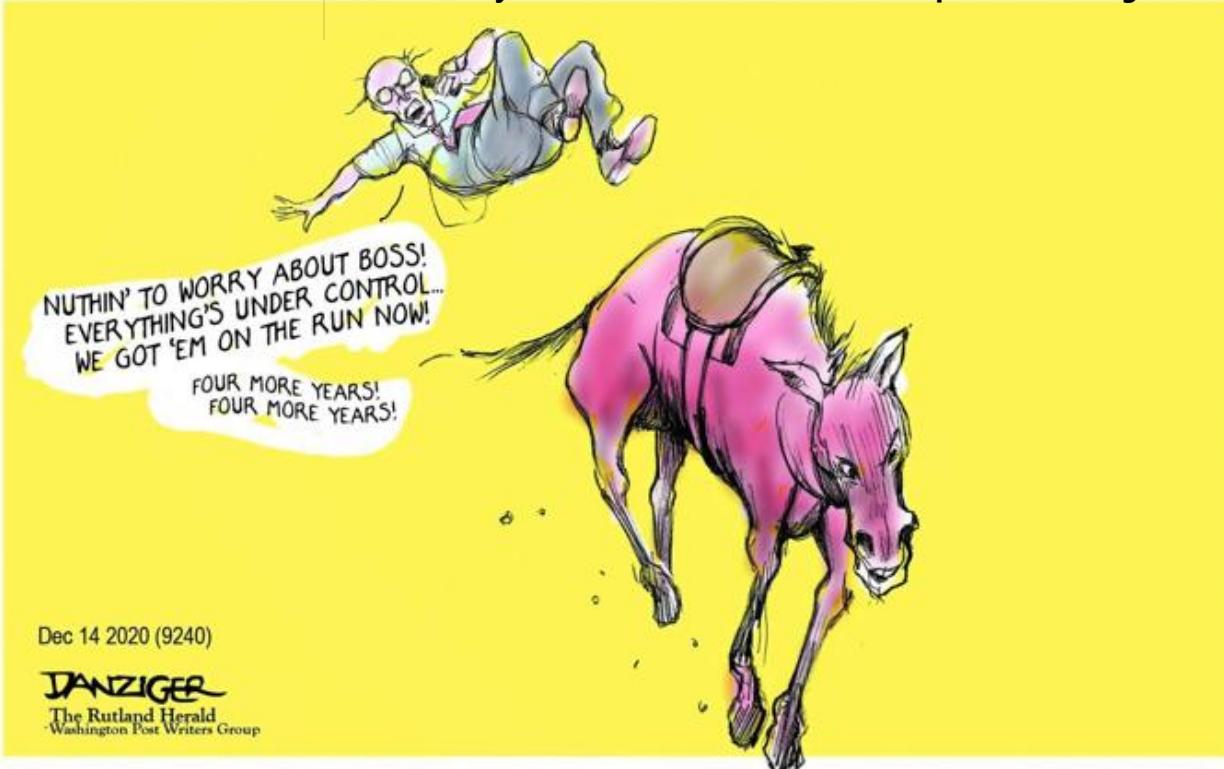
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Rudy Giuliani for the Plaintiff
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Jeff Danziger

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Problems in Texas: Lyin' To Cruz Will Defeat Trump. Who Lies Every Time He Speaks*



DANZIGER

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JANUARY 12, 2021



Lisa Benson

Lisa Benson cartoon

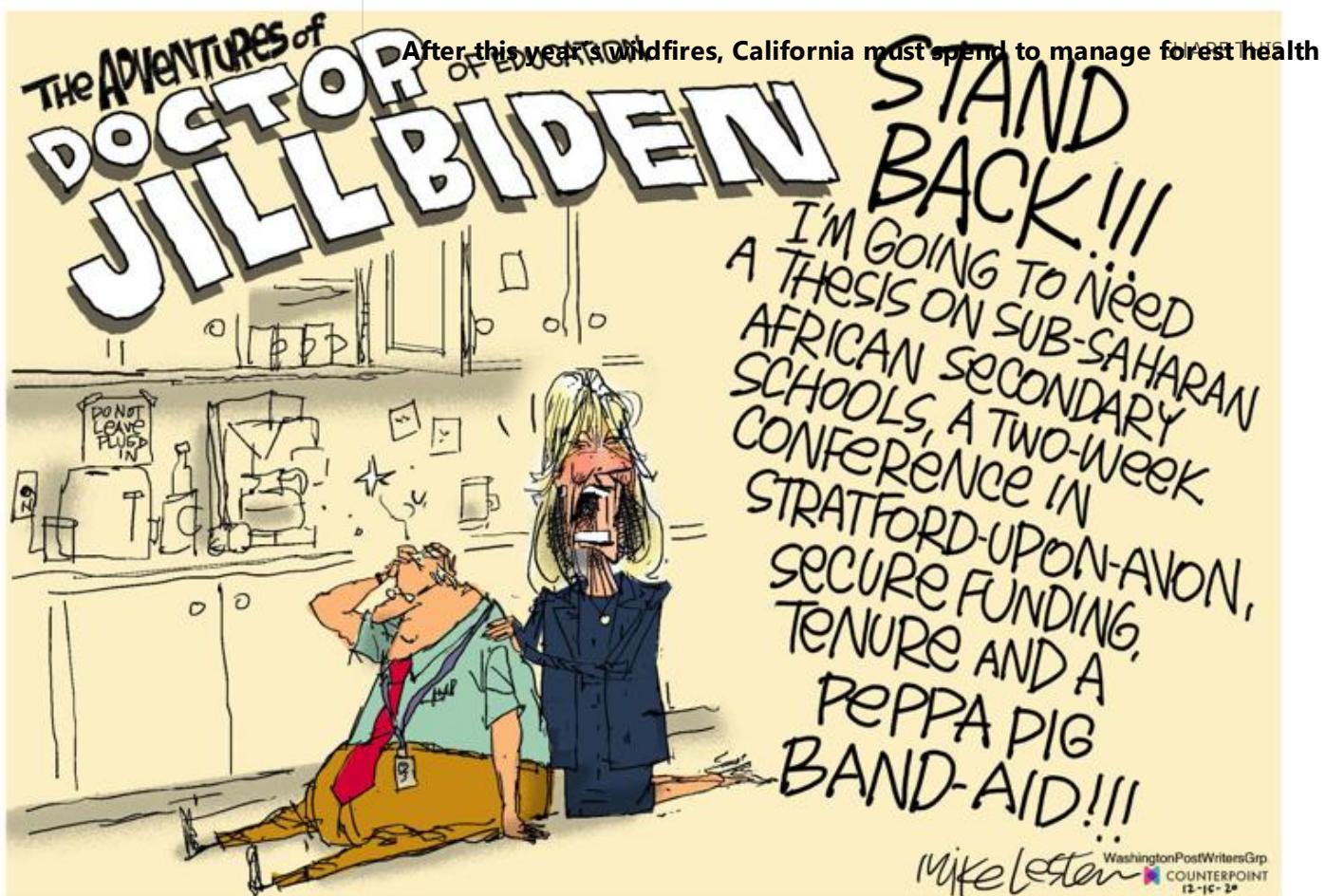




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Mike Lester

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After this year's wildfires, California must spend to manage forest health

Nick Anderson

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Signe Wilkinson



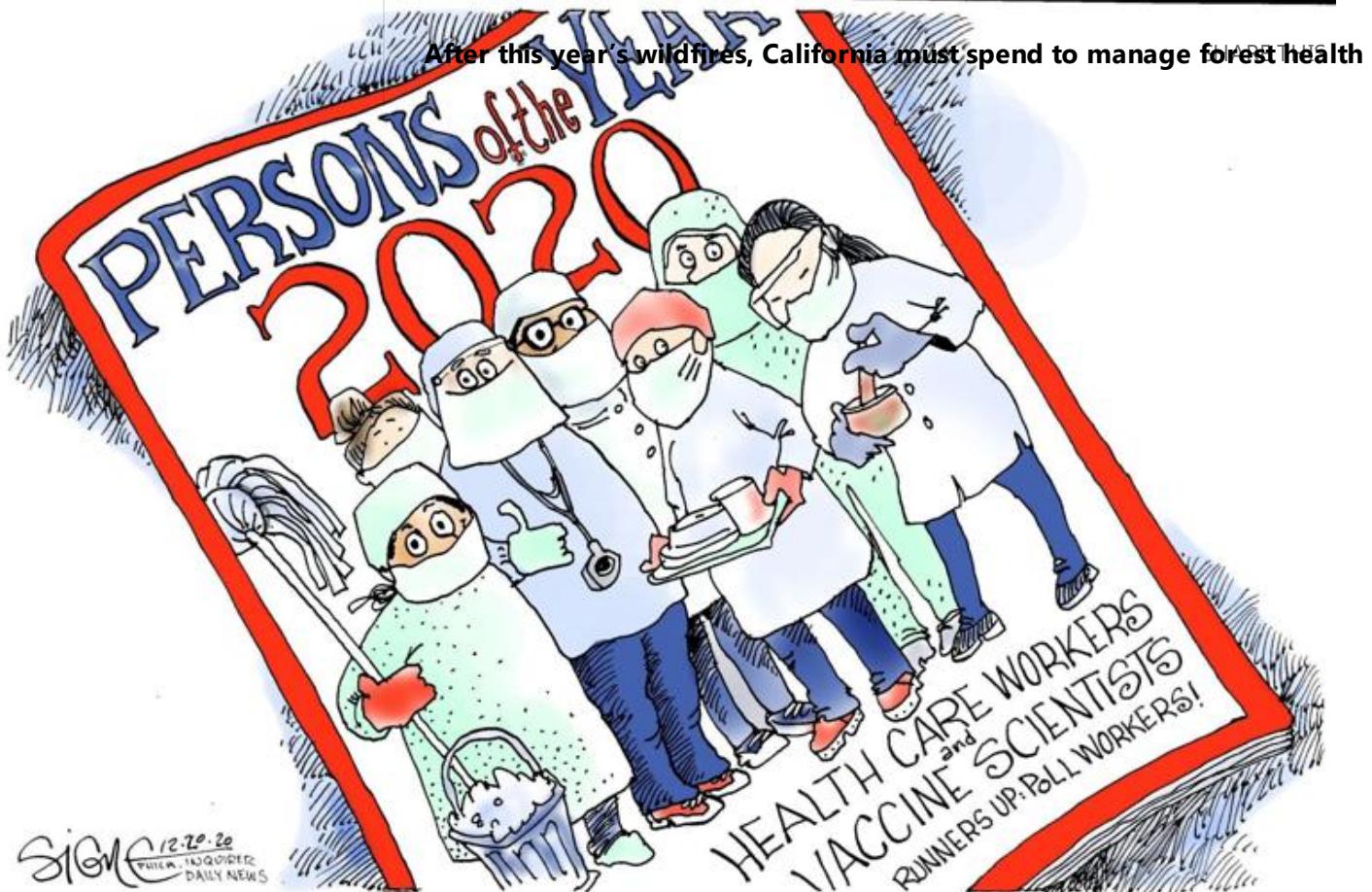


Signe cartoon 12-17-20 Tenants' Rights

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Tim Campbell

Tim Campbell Editorial Cartoons



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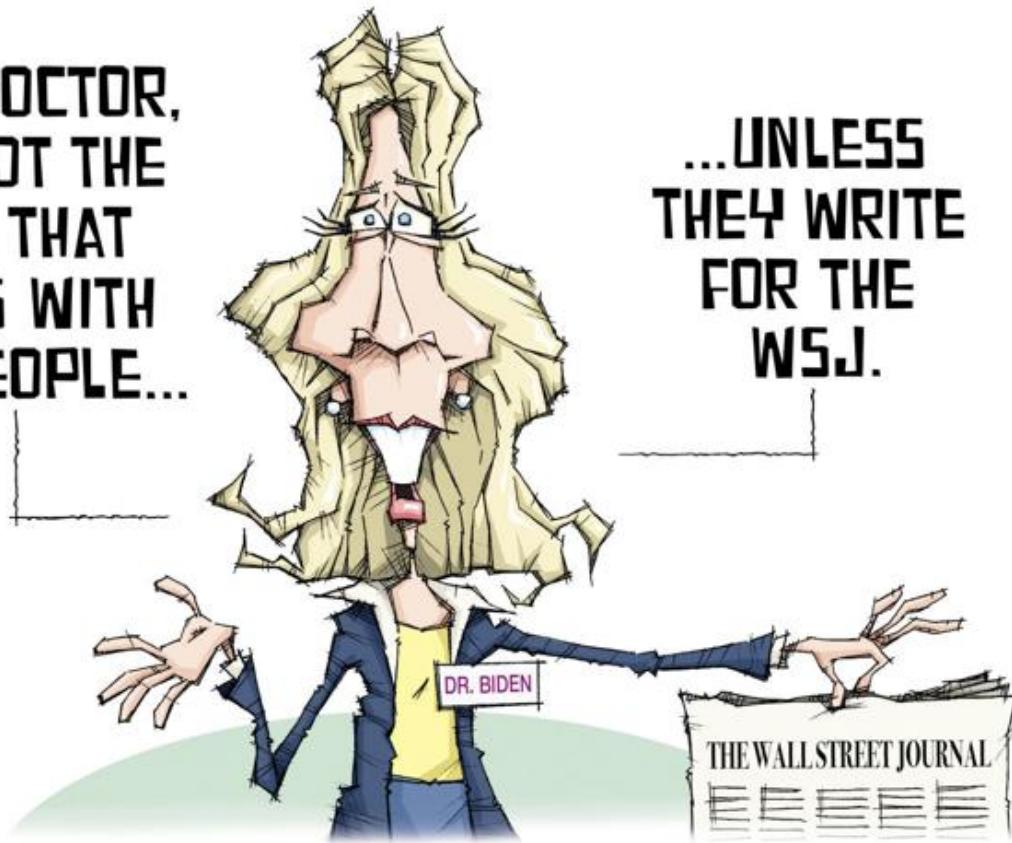
Tim Camp



After this year's wildfires, California must spend to manage forest health

I'M A DOCTOR,
BUT NOT THE
KIND THAT
DEALS WITH
SICK PEOPLE...

...UNLESS
THEY WRITE
FOR THE
WSJ.



RGB version

Tim Campbell

Robert Dugan is chair of the Placer County Water Agency Board of Directors and a board member of the Sacramento Regional Water Authority. He wrote this commentary for CalMatters, a public interest journalism venture committed to explaining how California's Capitol works and why it matters.

