Fire in the Earth System Abstracts
Vol. 1 FES-Fire on the screen-122
Valencia, Spain, 3-7 November, 2021
© Author(s) 2021. CC Attribution 3.0 License

Takes two to tango: Making sense of the California 2020 wildfire season Trump-Newsom political blame game

Seijo, Francisco

IE University School of Global and Public Affairs

Abstract

The 2020 wildfire season in California was exceptional for various reasons. First it shattered various statistical records in terms both of the number of fire incidents reported, 8,420 as well as burnt acres, 3,704,195; both were the highest reported figures since 1987. Second, it was also marked by an unprecedented political controvery between the then president of the United States Donald Trump and the governor of California Gavin Newsom. While the former argued that the California wildfires were the result of negligent fire management on the part of the state government the latter blamed the presidential administration's inaction regarding climate change as the main underlying driver of what both described as "the most destructive wildfire seasons in recent history". In this study we use framing and fire ecology theory to make sense of the political controversy surrounding the 2020 California wildfire season finding, like Buffalo Springfield, that "nobody's right if everybody's wrong". We specifically explore the issue in light of the current debate concerning "directional motivated reasoning" versus "accuracy motivated reasoning" in the interpretation of climate change related scientific evidence and point to the need for building an epistemic community frame that can effectively offset the increasing flammability of escalating political rhetoric regarding wildfires and their connection to the overarching climate change issue.

Keywords: Framing theory; California 2020 wildfire season; Fire ecology

References

Alissa Cordner & Eliana Schwartz (2019) Covering Wildfires: Media Emphasis and Silence after the Carlton and Okanogan Complex Wildfires, Society & Natural Resources, 32:5, 489-507, DOI: 10.1080/08941920.2018.1530816

Druckman, J.N., McGrath, M.C. The evidence for motivated reasoning in climate change preference formation. Nature Clim Change 9, 111–119 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-018-0360-1

Jill E. Hopke (2020) Connecting Extreme Heat Events to Climate Change: Media Coverage of Heat Waves and Wildfires, Environmental Communication, 14:4, 492-508, DOI:

10.1080/17524032.2019.1687537

DRAFT