



*Western Edition*  
"The West on Fire: Prologue"  
Released August 31, 2021

BILL DEVERELL: Here in the American West, wildfire season is lasting longer, and causing more destruction, with bigger and hotter fires, than ever before.

MONTAGE OF NEWS CLIPS OF WILDFIRES: "California's largest wildfire exploded in size overnight, forcing thousands more to evacuate." "A dangerous combination of extremely hot weather and dry brush, caused by a devastating drought..." "Wildfires are scorching the West coast, leaving behind a path of death and destruction, in California..."

DEVERELL: Wildfires are a part of our history.

REBECCA MILLER: Estimates indicate that between four and even 12 million acres burned in California every year. That would be pre-1800 time period we're talking about.

DEVERELL: And wildfires are part of our future, with more of them happening every year now, with greater and greater destruction.

MILLER: Even though we recognize the value of having fire in California, we're still faced with this tremendous overgrown fuel load.

DEVERELL: So, what can we learn from western fire? And how can we better live with fire? How can we adjust our lives, our expectations, our culture, our politics, our policies, even our landscapes, so that we can live with fire in more productive and safe ways.

(MUSIC)

DEVERELL: Welcome to *Western Edition*, from the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West. I'm Bill Deverell. I'm Director of the Institute and a professor of history at the University of Southern California, where I teach and write about the history of the American West. This podcast will look at the forces that have shaped and continue to shape the West. And our first season is called "The West on Fire." Indigenous inhabitants of the Western United States have long sought a holistic and meaningful relationship with fire. That relationship goes back millennia. Controlled burns thin out the undergrowth and burned-out trees, and restore the landscape in all kinds of ways. Now, tribal leaders are working closely with forestry agencies, institutions and individuals to increase the use of controlled burns, as a way to mitigate the most destructive aspects of western wildfire.

THERESA GREGOR: We're trying to, like, correct the mistakes from the past. So how do we use traditional ecological knowledge to not only just, like, revitalize culture, right? But to, to maintain our lands and restore habitats, and to make our homeland safer.

DEVERELL: Through much of the twentieth century, the official position and policy from regulatory agencies was that wildfire was bad. It was a destructive force on the landscape and it needed to be tamed, controlled, and even done away with. And that position was both symbolized and pushed forward by the longest-running public-service advertising campaign in the history of the United States.

CLIP FROM SMOKEY BEAR AD: "Remember, only you can prevent forest fires."

DEVERELL: In fact, "the Smokey Bear effect" has been blamed for turning the public against fires of any kind, which ironically leads to more and more destructive forest fires. And Smokey gets blamed for lots of other things too.

JOSH WHEELER: Smokey was emblematic of the government who was prone to overreach in all kinds of ways in Southern New Mexico, which had to do with the military, and land rights relating to grazing, and agriculture, and things like that.

DEVERELL: In the last couple of decades, we're rethinking our attitude towards fire. But with our changing climate and the prolonged effects of drought, a lot is on the line more than ever before.

(MUSIC)

DEVERELL: Fire also changes landscape, scorching the soils and setting the stage for mudslides and debris flows, which can be even more catastrophic than the fire events that predate them.

PETER WESTWICK: A wall of mud, about three or four feet high, that was going probably 25, 30 miles an hour, basically hit the house like a freight train.

DEVERELL: And wildfire tends to make inequities more pronounced, whether those inequities are due to race, class, gender, geography, or the immigration status of people affected by wildfires. In Los Angeles, Black firefighters pushed back against racism and segregated firehouses, towards the goal of greater equality. And that's a fight that continues very much to today.

BRENT BURTON: I mean, these men endured so much during the fifties and sixties, during that turbulent time of integration in the Civil Rights Movement that, you know, we have to keep this going in order to just preserve our history, in order to keep the door ajar for others that come behind us.

DEVERELL: For agricultural laborers who work in the fields of California and other portions of the American West growing and tending the food we eat, exposure to wildfire smoke has become a deadly hazard of their jobs. Many of these workers are undocumented. And many of them are also Indigenous peoples from Central America and Mexico.

MIKE MENDEZ: These individuals have been living in these communities for decades, if not a hundred years. And they're invisible because they're rendered invisible by public policy, systemic racism, and cultural norms of who's considered a worthy disaster victim.

DEVERELL: We'll also talk to a formerly incarcerated firefighter who now helps parolees gain the skills to get jobs fighting fire, while also rehabilitating their futures.

MICHELLE GARCIA: It is about getting these certificates, but it's about preparing you for a career in fire service, healing that past trauma that we've had in our lives that led us to prison and addressing some deep, dark secrets that a lot of people haven't addressed inside.

DEVERELL: Fire affects everyone on the planet. Smoke can travel across continental distances. Whoever you are and wherever you live, fire is part of your lives – and will continue to be so and even increase in its impacts.

Listen up for *Western Edition*, season one: "The West on Fire." Launching September 7, 2021. Find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, and wherever you find podcasts.

(MUSIC)