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The climate crisis almost destroyed my town — yours could be next

BY DEVIN MIDDLEBROOK, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 07/29/22 12:00 PM ET
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(AP Photo/Noah Berger)

Flames consume a home on Triangle Rd. as the Oak Fire burns in Mariposa County, Calif., on Saturday, July 23, 2022. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

In times of crisis, our nation has proven willing to act swiftly and boldly. We've deployed troops and military aid to conflict zones around the world. We've dispatched humanitarian relief and care to areas stricken by disease or disaster. We are, and always have been, a country of action.

Yet, with the current climate crisis roaring across our own nation, we remain largely stagnant, even regressive in our fight. We are retreating against the threat of catastrophic weather events and turning away from the environmental and economic impacts of climate destruction. Federal elected officials watch as American homes, businesses and communities catch fire, even when they hold the power, the legislative plan, that can extinguish the flames.

Here in South Lake Tahoe, we've seen the devastating effects of wildfires, and just last year, the Caldor fire came close to destroying our town. Just to our west, the town of Grizzly Flats was destroyed by the same fire. Now, the Oak fire is burning near Yosemite. We have repeatedly warned officials of the increasing frequency, duration and intensity of these disasters. It is no longer just a western problem. In fact, the New York Times recently released a report showing Americans now live with significant wildfire risk.

For those who don't face the deadly fires and choking smoke every season, many are faced with equally catastrophic floods, hurricanes, drought, blizzards, overwhelming heat or tornadoes. Not to mention the soaring cost of the fuel needed to cool our homes in the summer, warm them in the winter, and power our vehicles throughout the year.

The climate crisis is, quite literally, at our nation's doorstep, and it's being accelerated by our dependence on fossil fuels. Most recently the oil and gas industry continues its relentless push to open more leasing of our public lands for oil and gas drilling. The companies claimed that these contracts were critical to bringing down prices at the pump, but that was simply a lobbying strategy.

The truth is many of these companies hold their leases without drilling, effectively locking out others from accessing those lands and frequently damaging the land in the process. Companies who operate on public lands often do so recklessly, putting the quality of our air, land and water at risk of contamination. Furthermore, the entire program is considered "high risk" for government fraud, waste and abuse, meaning American

taxpayers are often left holding the bill while gas companies cash their checks.

For decades, the onshore leasing program has shortchanged taxpayers while communities have had to spend limited funds on climate emergencies. In fact, it's estimated that the program's outdated royalty rate cost taxpayers \$13.1 billion in revenue between 2012 and 2021. Oil and gas companies know that if they can hold back progress for just a few more weeks until Congress adjourns for summer recess and election season, they will be safe to continue to exploit our land, water and wallets for another year.

But we can't wait another year. We can't wait another month. With conditions in the Southwest the driest they've been in 1,200 years, we're already experiencing, again, a deadly and destructive fire season that now lasts throughout the year. According to experts, it's only going to get worse, with the risk of fire damage spreading across the south creating a deadly fire region that stretches from coast to coast.

The need for action now has never been clearer. The City of South Lake Tahoe was the first city in our nation to make a pledge toward fully powering our community with carbon-free electricity by 2030. Now is the federal government's turn to step up.

The administration has a plan, and a smart one, to fight back against both the environmental and economic destruction caused by climate change. Not only is this plan data-driven and science-based, it's also wildly popular. We have the information we need to combat this threat and we have the support of American citizens. Now, members of Congress must fulfill their duties and responsibilities to their voters and pass strong climate legislation. Our nation desperately needs a defensive charge against the catastrophic destruction of climate change and I urge Congress to pass legislation that does just that.

Devin Middlebrook was born and raised in South Lake Tahoe, California and now serves as the city's Mayor.