STOP PLAYING WITH FIRE: SPRAWLING INTO BURN ZONES IS PREDICTABLY DISASTROUS

People from New Orleans dislike me. That's because I've opined that we not spend another dime of federal money rebuilding doomed situations. Now they're going to dislike me in Southern California for the same reason. The federal answer to California's annual maelstrom of firestorms should not be to declare war on chaparral. It should be to help residents stay away from this flammable vegetation.

Let the state spend all it wants buying more fire engines, dousing the land with chemicals, patrolling the landscape and investigating arsonists. Let the towns develop and pay for layers of architectural regulations designed to minimize fire damage. Let private insurance companies assess and demand the real cost of living in a seasonal blast furnace.

But please, please, please, don't let this happen with my tax dollars. The fastest growing segment of the national wildfire budget is the protection of new, privately owned single-family homes being built in flammable woodlands. In Southern California alone, more than 325,000 homes were built during the decade 1990-2000 in fire-prone areas. These homeowners' lives are being risked unnecessarily.

I came very close to skipping this subject this year. I didn't think I had anything to say that I didn't include in last year's column about the Esperanza wildfires, which generated almost identical media coverage, complete with grieving homeowners, courageous firefighters, dive-bombing aircraft and hellish images. As with last year, the main story was the gripping emotional response, rather than the measured rational response of risk assessment and regulation.

Finally, it dawned on me that revisiting the subject of California wildfires would demonstrate that what's being billed the nation's worst disaster since Hurricane Katrina is really nothing more than an annual replay of an avoidable situation.

I am not suggesting that we vacate Southern California. What I'm suggesting is that the state and counties develop and enforce tougher regulations that prevent the relentless sprawl of flammable homes into the secluded canyons and hills most prone to burning.

Decision-makers don't seem to understand the very clear difference between a natural hazard and the level of risk posed by that hazard.

A natural hazard has nothing to do with human beings. In the case of Southern California, the hazard results from the seasonal alignment of four factors.

The chaparral ecosystem requires fire just as surely as we require food. As John McPhee writes, it has "an always developing, relentlessly intensifying, vital necessity to burst into flames." The second factor is the high likelihood of bone-dry conditions in late autumn after the prolonged bake of summer.

Third, seasonal Santa Ana winds drain down from the Colorado Plateau like broad rivers of west-flowing air. Finally, the rugged ridge and ravine topography converts this flow into a chaos of gusts and eddies that fan the flames in canyons like bellows and launch glowing cinders on summits like out-of-control kites. This perfectly natural intermittent conflagration has been going on for millennia.

Risk, on the other hand, has everything to do with human beings. Policies dealing with exposure to the hazard, building codes and emergency response increase or decrease the risk of a hazard that may not have changed at all. Suppressing small fires only adds to the fuel, thereby increasing risk.
Allowing the suburban population to spread out over a wooded landscape increases the risk of wildfire only slightly in the well-watered East. But in the intermittently soaked and desiccated landscapes of the Southwest, the same pattern of building greatly elevates the risk.

Most of the 1,800 homes that burned in California during this year's baseball playoff season would not have burned if tougher non-architectural zoning measures had been taken to reduce the risk. Ridgelines and canyons can be avoided. Houses can be clustered into communities moated by wide fire breaks. Standing fuel can be thinned by controlled burns if necessary.

But alas, this is too obvious. Californians want to have their cake (spreading out in a Mediterranean climate) and eat it too (fire protection at federally subsidized rates).

Declaring war on Mother Nature each year is not the way to go. Let's learn to live with her fiery moods instead.