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THE FIRE, THE FURY & THE FOOTPRINT

The mass devastation wrought by the worst wildfires in California's history demand a serious examination of the role of human population growth in the development and consumption of vital resources. Are we up for it?

An NPG Forum Paper
by Mark Cromer

Abstract: Naturally occurring events such as wild fires and hurricanes can turn into horrific calamities when they slam into cities and towns to consume human lives and wreck ever larger scales of destruction, filling the news cycles with heartbreaking accounts of loss, harrowing reports from survivors and the heroic actions of emergency crews. Yet the national discourse in the aftermath of these cyclic and accelerating natural events remains stuck in a pattern focused primarily on rebuilding in the same places and in the same manner. Precious little emphasis has been placed on how a changing climate with growing human population densities have all intersected with these cataclysms. The California wildfires that exploded across Los Angeles and San Diego counties at the dawn of 2025 offer a tragically fresh chance to reexamine the role that human population is playing in these disasters and what can be done to mitigate its impacts.

They still call it 'fire season' for reasons of sheer simplicity.

It's a tidy two-word term that public officials and emergency responders have used for generations to hopefully catch the attention of California residents and remind them of the terrible danger that can come from a campfire or an offroad vehicle to a bottle rocket or a wayward flicked cigarette.

Thirty years ago, it was a cautionary advisory that would be rolled out in June and was usually retired by October, as autumn arrived and the fall rains came. Today, fire season in California runs two-thirds of the year, spanning eight months from May through December, according to the state's preeminent fire-fighting agency, Cal Fire.[1]

That all may soon change effectively to a year-round perpetual alert, considering that the most devastating wildfires in the state's history exploded across the Southern California hillsides in January, unleashing monstrous infernos during the dead of winter that devoured dozens of lives and more than 16,000 structures while scorching nearly 60,000 acres and annihilating wildlife habitat already buckling under the weight of the human interface.

The sheer scale of the destruction evoked grim comparisons to the horrific aftermath of the dropping of the first atomic bomb, with comedian and former late night host Jay Leno appearing in a state of shock as he told CNN's Anderson Cooper that his neighborhood in Pacific Palisades "Looks like Hiroshima or just some horrible thing. It's an entire city wiped out."[2]

While it is still called 'fire season,' at least for now, the state's official warning label for the wildfire threat may as well be updated to 'Hell Alert' for purposes of accuracy-in-outcome and to better focus the public's attention and its discourse on the risks that must be considered as rebuilding gets underway.

Ash was still drifting lazily down from the sky like scorched snowflakes fluttering onto the smoldering carcasses of neighborhoods that had risen from the great building sprees of Post-War America as talk of rebuilding began. The mid-Twentieth Century development boom that saw housing tracts spread across the foothills in Los Angeles County and along the coastline of the state's Pacific shore was once again in play, with an eye on recreating the past.

Even when the original neighborhoods were built, the very real risks were well known to builders, whether they were planning a custom home or a housing tract.

Building deep into the hillsides and canyons has always been essentially the equivalent of pitching a tent, setting up a cot and then starting a campfire all in the middle of an ammo dump – albeit one where the explosive munitions are provided by Mother Nature – but humankind has long been drawn to the practice by an almost otherworldly gravitational pull despite the increasingly obvious risks.

To paraphrase George Mallory's quest to summit Mt. Everest: They build because it is there.

Hillside homes in California precede the gold rush that made the state, dating back to the Spanish adobe era. It was the Post-War building boom that really launched the inexorable spread of development across the once wild landscape of the Golden State.

Throughout Los Angeles County, the hillsides are dotted and clotted with neighborhoods. They stretch from the upscale cloister of Claraboya nestled above the leafy streets of the college town of Claremont at the county's far eastern edge and run westerly through a bevy of so-called 'bedroom communities' such as La Verne, Glendora, Bradbury, Monrovia, Arcadia all the way to Pasadena and Alta Dena.

Further west still are the iconic streets of the Hollywood Hills and its legendary enclaves of Laurel Canyon, Nichols Canyon and Beachwood Canyon, and Beverly Hills and Bel Air. Beyond those lie the neighborhoods of Brentwood, Pacific Palisades, Topanga and finally Malibu, where the homes trail down to the sands that kiss the Pacific.

As spring arrives this year, entire swaths of neighborhoods in Alta Dena, Pasadena, Topanga and Malibu are simply gone, burnt to the ground by insatiable flames. This horror was witnessed by a global audience as the television news networks programmed another massive catastrophe for the world to behold and be thankful it wasn't us, at least just yet.

With the dying of the flames, the horror of the sheer magnitude of the wildfires gave way to deep sorrow for the souls that were lost and the family heirlooms and personal possessions that were destroyed with them. But the rugged human spirit of determination and resilience began to quickly emerge even as the mass shock began to recede, with various visions for rebuilding sprouting across news platforms as public officials, developers and urban planning experts began to vie for influence.

As the recovery in Los Angeles County now begins yet again, just as surely as it does across all the other regions throughout the state that have burned this year, Cal Fire reported nearly 400 wildfires in the opening weeks of 2025. Blazes that stretched from San Diego to Santa Barbara[3] with costs already projected at more than $250 billion[4] raise questions as to whether rebuilding to scale or even larger is appropriate. They are questions that are even more profound as the county, state and nation continue to struggle with vital resource availability and distribution as well as basic quality of life considerations for all inhabitants.

Amid crushing housing prices and relentlessly spiking rental costs, there has been an ongoing civic push by housing activists nationally to dramatically increase the stocks of high-density multifamily housing units and particularly in so-called transit corridors that provide high-volume travel to commuters. Will the fire ravaged areas across Los Angeles County and the rest of the state now be subjected to a massive redevelopment plan that will reconfigure the suburban sprawl defined by tracts of ubiquitous single-family homes to much higher density population clusters?

And if so, does it make sense to place large scale multifamily complexes throughout otherwise rugged geographic areas that have proven to be, time and again, often simply indefensible for even rambling collections of rustic houses, artist bungalows and mansions? The fires this time laid glaringly bare another growing schism in American society as news organizations reported that "private firefighters" had deployed alongside the publicly-funded emergency crews battling the blazes.[5] The mercenary fire crews, often staffed by retired firefighters, provided wealthy clients supplemental protection that draws on private resources such as pool water, prepositioned water tanks and other private fire retardants.[6]

Disasters often highlight the social disparities between the proverbial 'haves and have nots' as well as those who 'have everything and then some' and the widening wealth gap in society has seen the financially flush turn to private services as a hedge against public resources increasingly strained by population growth. Private security services, luxury medical care centers, private water supply systems and private disaster response teams are now all part of the constellation of amenities offered to those who can afford them.

Concierge disaster service may be a very California thing, and one that reeks of the excesses often flaunted by Hollywood and Silicon Valley elites,

but it is certainly not the answer to the profound questions confronting the state and Los Angeles.

Coherent explanations and comprehendible plans for the most practical, efficient and realistic way forward as recovery turns to rebuilding – garnished with ample details but not buried in a blizzard of developer jargon and bureaucratic legalese – must be demanded of the public officials that lead our cities and counties across the state. The private sector captains who stand to profit handsomely during such robust periods of rebuilding must also be called to account and held to answer for what their plans call for in the months and years ahead.

For native Angeleno and career Los Angeles public official Zev Yaroslavsky, the questions and the struggle to draw the proper conclusions and arrive at the correct answers in the aftermath of the wildfires is sadly old hat. Born in Los Angeles in 1948 as the Baby Boom was underway and the population growth in Los Angeles was booming too, with nearly 2 million people calling the city home by 1950 and marking a 31-percent increase since the 1940 census.[7] Yaroslavsky was first elected to the Los Angeles City Council in 1975 in a political temblor that shook the city's establishment. When Mayor Tom Bradley swore a then just 26-years-old Yaroslavsky into office, Bradley offered a backhanded welcoming remark to Yaroslavsky: "Congratulations, now you are part of the establishment."[8]

Yaroslavsky reportedly retorted with: "Yes, but the establishment is not part of me."[9]

By the time he retired from public office four decades later, the establishment had very much become part of Yaroslavsky as he moved from the Los Angeles City Council to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. Throughout this era, both the city and county continued to see substantial development and population growth, though the surge of population had ebbed slightly from the peak experienced in 1940s and 1950s. [10]

The mass destruction that swept across Los Angeles County in the opening days of 2025 certainly hit home for Yaroslavsky, whose previous supervisorial district included the Palisades, and thus he understandably offers an unvarnished assessment of what the road back should look like.

"My view on the rebuilding after the fires is very straight forward: Residential and commercial property owners should be allowed to rebuild what they had there before; not necessarily the exact architecture, but the same size and use," Yaroslavsky said. "That is a view that is shared by county and city political leaders, although not by academics and planners. The one caveat is that the rebuilds need to be built to today's building code, e.g. fire-resistant roofs and materials, rather than the building code of the time the destroyed structures were originally built."[11]

THE BIGGER PICTURE OF BURNS

Despite the significant resources that are marshalled in the aftermath of wildfires, the rebuilding process is more often than not a slog that lends credence to the perspective that what took years to build can be lost in a flash but then take even longer to rebuild or replace.

The Urban Institute studied timelines of recovery in four wildfires that created similar devastation in Hawaii, Colorado and Northern California and specifically sought comparable housing markets for analysis, looking for impacted areas that had high prices, low vacancy and significant population displacement as a result of the fires.[12]

The results of the Urban Institute's comparative analysis are jarring. After applying a recovery template that is set across three stages – debris removal, building permit and certificate of occupancy to examine the overall progress of a recovery effort – the Institute reported that recovery efforts in California's Carr Fire (2018) and Camp Fire (2018), Colorado's Marshall Fire (2022) and Hawaii's Maui Wildfires (2023) have progressed little beyond debris clearance.[13]

The Carr Fire ravaged across Northern California's Shasta and Trinity counties nearly seven years ago, damaging or destroying approximately 1,300 homes. As of 2025, more than half of those homes have not received building permits. Of those that have been rebuilt, only 36-percent of them have been occupied. In the aftermath of the fires that destroyed the town of Lahaina on Maui in August 2023, burning down nearly 1,900 homes, building permits have been issued for just 14-percent of homes lost.[14]

Considering the much larger area of devastation in Los Angeles County and the number of people displaced – a population estimated as high as 50,000 people[15] – the local and state bureaucratic obstacle courses that have reduced other rebuilding efforts to a molasses-pace may itself be jettisoned by officials fearful of political fallout and electoral retribution.

Yet restoring the original footprint in fire-ravaged areas along roughly the same specifications of the housing developments of the mid-Twentieth Century

would mean once again rebuilding large numbers of single-family homes – somewhere in the neighborhood of 10,000 homes – in a region that has seen heavy-handed directives from the state government in Sacramento to curtail classic nuclear family homes.

The focus, as far as Sacramento is concerned, should be in not only building ever-larger swaths of high-density multifamily apartment complexes but to also replace existing low-density neighborhoods with expanded housing units through aggressive rezoning initiatives.

The competing interests at play here are both compelling and their collision has produced a dynamic situation of which the outcome is far from clear.

On the one hand, the desire to rebuild places and things that have been tragically lost to disaster and restore them to their former glory is emotionally enticing. On the other hand, powerful interests see the past as simply that, an era whose time has come and gone, and they seek to shape not only the rebuilding of the disaster zones but of practically all new development through mandating high-density residential requirements.

From this perspective, the proverbial American Dream that's long been rooted in ownership of a single-family home must now be reimagined as something far less reliant on the place and space that the family home had established as the benchmark for much of a century.

Patrick Belmont, a professor in the Department of Watershed Sciences at Utah State University whose research has focused on the impacts that wildfires have on the environment and water resources, is equally blunt in his assessment that the model for development cannot hew to the templates that defined the Twentieth Century homebuilding experience.

"Low density growth is a part of the problem, the expansion of the urban/wild interface with luxury custom homes. This type of development locks us into decades of high energy use, high pollution generation, high traffic congestion," Belmont said.[16] "Utah is the fastest growing state in the nation and we're living in a dustbowl. We're the second driest state in the union and yet we have the highest per capita water consumption in the country."

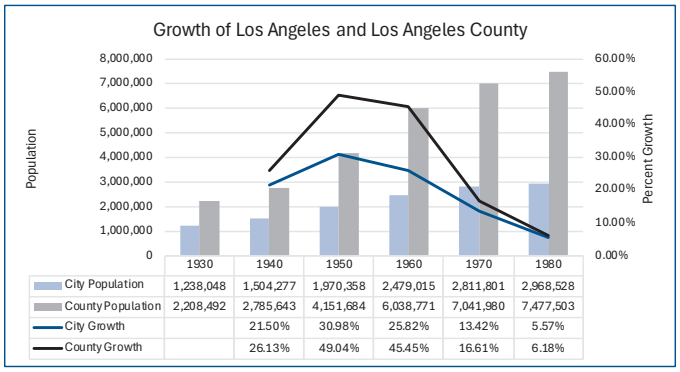
But the primary culprit of water consumption, Belmont said, was commercial agriculture, not human consumption or industrial usage.

"And despite tremendous population and economic growth over the past few decades, we have not increased residential or industrial water use at all. We've been building in water-wise ways that focus on conservation. Agriculture is the big consumer. I think there's an important lesson to be learned there. While population growth makes it harder to minimize our environmental impacts, we could be growing in ways that have far less impact."[17]

Arguments have long been made that growth can be accommodated through methods that mitigate impacts across the environmental spectrum, but the actual fact remains that humankind rarely if ever implements such 'smart growth' strategies. What we hypothetically could be doing rarely corresponds to what we have actually done and continue to do.

While Utah's growing pains may be at least somewhat ameliorated by more efficient planning that takes into account the strains that 'Big Ag' places on vital resources such as water, 400 miles to the south of the Beehive State, the urban sprawl of Los Angeles and its surrounding county have already tested the limits of human capacity in a far from hospitable landscape.

The population of Los Angeles has doubled in size since Yaroslavsky was born in 1948, currently hovering around 4 million residents, and the population of the county has more than tripled since he has been on the planet, growing to more than 10 million people. Even in a place as imaginative and imaginary as Los Angeles, it's difficult to envision that the party can go on indefinitely. The wildfires have placed enormous strains on an infrastructure that increasingly appears antiquated to many residents.



	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980
City Population	1,238,048	1,504,277	1,970,358	2,479,015	2,811,801	2,968,528
County Population	2,208,492	2,785,643	4,151,684	6,038,771	7,041,980	7,477,503
City Growth		21.50%	30.98%	25.82%	13.42%	5.57%
County Growth		26.13%	49.04%	45.45%	16.61%	6.18%

Some of the most startling images to emerge during the wildfires – some might be tempted to call them *damning* – were not of the flames sweeping across the hillsides and through the communities but rather of a huge Los Angeles Department of Water and Power reservoir in a critical area sitting as dry as

the Sahara[18] and of a large number of fire engines sitting idle in repair yards waiting for maintenance.[19]

"Let's be clear, Los Angeles is an accidental city," Yaroslavsky said. "When originally settled by non-indigenous persons, it had a limited water supply, no natural harbor, a somewhat arid climate, and a topography and geology that provided for fires, quakes, and floods. The question of whether to build in such an area was answered a century or more ago, so let's not dwell on what might have been."[20]

Whether the 'accidental city' of LA has taken shape either by random municipal happenstance or reckless disregard for the truth of what can actually be adequately defended during a wildfire, Yaroslavsky believes that what's done is done.

"Policy makers and real estate investors encouraged development in high-risk areas. That cow has left the barn," he said. "There have been significant efforts to discourage sprawl, especially in areas such as the Santa Monica and Tehachapi mountains for reasons related to climate change and wilderness preservation. There will be far fewer subdivisions in those areas than in years past. However, as to what was built in the last century or so, they are here to stay, and it is our responsibility to inoculate them from prospective disasters as best as possible."[21]

As the myriad civic stakeholders attempt to plot a path forward across the scarred topography of Los Angeles County and much of the rest of Southern California, Professor Belmont said that ultimately and hopefully much sooner than later the old mold that has been used to cast the human footprint for a century will simply be either broken or cast aside.

The first step in that regard has to be a sea shift in the cultural values around growth and particularly economic growth, according to academics like Belmont, as the primary metric through which the value of virtually everything must be viewed.

"Our obsession with GDP is dangerous and it is an integral part of our consumption of energy, which leads to having to increase our energy to fuel growth of our GDP and its ultimately a fantasy of exponential growth without end. But the perpetual GDP growth will end. There's no question about it. Physics dictates that we can't have perpetual exponential growth on a finite planet," Belmont said. "The question before us is whether GDP growth ends by disaster or design. On our current path, this ends in a big and perhaps unrecoverable mess. The design option requires that we simply stop trying to optimize for GDP growth and instead optimize our economy for the things we care about; clean air, clean water, good food, healthy soils and forests, etc."[22]

Continually looking for gimmicks that paper over or digitally conceal the costs of the glidepath of growth that we have maintained for at least a half-century will do nothing to prevent the ultimate hard impact that eventually awaits us.

"We find ways to cheat, we make it legal to allow some people to pollute and destroy habitat, we allow some to lie about the human and environmental costs, both today and in the future, of burning fossil fuels, in order to keep the money flowing, which again is GDP," Belmont said. "We have a culture that always errs on the side of plentiful and that is catching up to us."[23]

Yaroslavsky said that in the immediate sense, the takeaways from the infernos that raged across Southern California and in particular Los Angeles County are fairly clear. A few might even be considered by some to be heartening, in that the disaster was at least partially fueled by a series of circumstances that may not befall the region immediately again.

"As to lessons to learn, first, let's recognize that these fires were a perfect fire storm. Humidity was at record lows, winds were at record highs, Southern California hadn't had a drop of rain since last May, and the brush was over grown after record rains last year and they were tinder dry," Yaroslavsky said. "As every fire professional has said, there is virtually nothing they could do to successfully attack or defend against hurricane force winds of up to 100 mph. Aircraft that are the backbone of the initial attack on a fire were grounded due to the high winds. Having said that, there are a few lessons we can already identify, and many more to come when the inevitable post mortem is done."[24]

Yaroslavsky then ticks off a 'fail list' that includes "pre-deployment of fire trucks that was not at its maximum despite credible predictions of the unprecedented meteorological conditions" and noted with a just dash of bitter sarcasm: "While the county fire department held over its shift on January 7, the city fire department let their shifts go home."

Additionally, Yaroslavsky noted that too many fire hydrants lacked water or sufficient water pressure to provide for adequate firefighting capacity. It was a grim reminder of a lesson not learned from another one of Los Angeles County's flaming disasters that also made headlines around the world: The Bel Air

Fire. In early November 1961, a brush fire swept across the famed enclave and raged for four days as desperate residents fled for their lives down canyon roads that bottled up emergency efforts. By the time the fire was extinguished, amazingly no deaths were reported but 200 people suffered injuries and nearly 500 homes were destroyed.[25]

The destruction of Bel Air in 1961 ostensibly led to a deep rethink of fire safety standards across Los Angeles, its county and the state at large. A documentary produced by the Los Angeles City Fire Department determined that building homes would be problematic in terms of fire protection even under the most ideal circumstances.[26]

That was more than 60 years ago.

"This was one of the main lessons gleaned from the 1961 fire, and for reasons that defy credulity, we had a repeat of that infrastructure failure," Yaroslavsky said. "There are reports that there are thousands of fire hydrants that need to be repaired or need attention throughout the city, and what we had on January 7 was a systemic failure of that critical infrastructure."[27]

Or as Yogi Berra might have observed: It's déjà vu all over again.

But there is an interesting dynamic with contradictory currents that now courses throughout the state and particularly in teeming Southern California, where even residents in small foothill towns and bedroom communities are feeling increasingly pinched on streets that are increasingly crowded and clogged with traffic despite all the electric scooters. While by some estimates the state lost more than a half-million residents between 2020 and 2023 and added another 800,000 housing units over the same period, the housing shortage appears to be more pronounced than ever. The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) has estimated that the state needs to add another 3.5 million homes.[28]

Hans Johnson, a Senior Fellow at PPIC who studies domestic migration patterns and housing in California, observed that despite the recent net outflow of people from the state, decades of adding more people than it could adequately house has left housing stocks deficient and costly.[29]

"One of the conundrums of what's happened in California with this population loss is that at the same time that we've lost over 500,000 people, we added several hundred thousand new housing units over the last few years," Johnson said. "And I should note that the nature of the new housing that we're building also has led to a decline in the number of people for housing units. Specifically, we're building a lot of multi-unit housing – large buildings with five or more units per building. And the number of single-family detached homes that we're building in California is actually declining."[30]

Despite Yaroslavsky's assertion that the neighborhoods that have been effectively erased by the wildfires can and likely will be rebuilt largely as they were before, the political pressures to remake them with housing units featuring much greater population densities will be enormous over time. The optics of longstanding communities being knuckled under to build ever more towering multifamily housing complexes that completely alter the character of these towns while the areas devastated by the wildfires – many of them upscale – are allowed to rebuild exactly as it was before has more than a hypocritical whiff of *high-density for thee, but not for me.*

Still, Yaroslavsky remains confident that Los Angeles, both the city and the county, along with the state can get its act together as it approaches the solutions to rebuilding.

"I am very optimistic that the correct conclusions will be drawn by political and civic leadership as well as the citizens. After every major disaster that I've lived through – whether it's fire, earthquakes, or floods – there are weaknesses in our defenses that we strengthen," he said. "Examples include the banning of wood shake roofs in fire hazard areas, reinforced masonry buildings after quakes, etc. With every disaster we enhance our fire and/or building code, and I fully expect we will see that in the aftermath of the Palisades and Eaton fires."[31]

Editorial credit: Allan Grant/The LIFE Picture Collection/Shutterstock

Perhaps, but it's worth noting that one of the iconic images to emerge from the Bel Air Fire in November 1961 was of then former Vice President Richard Nixon atop the roof of the Brentwood home he was renting with a garden hose in his hand and spraying his wood shake roof before having to flee. Yet nearly three more decades would pass before Los Angeles banned the wood roof coverings.[32]

California's history of building in areas that are prone to detonate into flames is rich with teachable catastrophes, yet even its leadership seems to acknowledge that the lessons of what needs to be done have proven elusive when it comes to putting them into practice.

In October 2003, wildfires exploded in Southern California's San Bernardino Mountains and further south in the Cleveland National Forest, and the resulting infernos across a region that was rapidly being developed to support the state's burgeoning population growth would scorch nearly three-quarters of a million acres, destroy more than 3,600 homes and buildings and take the lives of at least 24 people.[33]

A Blue-Ribbon Fire Commission subsequently appointed by then Governor Gray Davis and Governor-elect Arnold Schwarzenegger reflected on the catastrophic damage that the wildfires had wrought on the region's wildlife and watershed, but also offered a bitter assessment of the sludge-like response from Sacramento leading up to the catastrophe. "The Commission determined that, while the bravery and dedication of California's fire service continues to be exemplary, many lessons from similar past tragedies have gone unlearned by those responsible for development of fire safety and prevention policies," wrote former State Senator William Campbell, chairman of the commission.[34]

Yaroslavsky suggests that a silver-lining may be found in the wildfires if population growth is directed away from the sprawl of suburbia and its urban/wild interface and further concentrated into the cities. But this of course raises the issue of cities being further stretched beyond the existing capacities of their infrastructure that are now so ubiquitously on display, from the garish plight of the legions of the homeless to the delivery of basic services that in many places seem increasingly like a flickering light bulb.

"As to how much more can this region grow, that is not in the sole power of the government," he said. "In our society, we can't prohibit people from moving into this region. Even the Soviet Union, that placed a cap on cities' populations, they couldn't control migration; even in a dictatorship. So, there is and will continue to be pressure to build more housing to accommodate population growth, and that growth is more likely to be concentrated in the urban areas rather than the undeveloped wilderness that surrounds it. I say more likely, but not exclusively in the urban areas. That is the subject of significant controversy and political battles up and down the state of California."[35]

Yaroslavsky's estimation that the pressures to increase population numbers and densities will be a subject "of significant controversy" is an understatement. Angelenos and Southern Californians are already seething at the impacts that the flywheel of perpetual growth has delivered.

But Utah State's Belmont sees a glass half-empty – and spider-webbed with cracks – if the civic leadership across all levels of society can't focus past the bright and shiny objects that have proven so devastatingly distracting as we zoom into the 21st Century.

"There's something called Game Theory which we see playing out in our society, where we live in this competitive environment and we utilize any new technology that comes out to our maximum benefit or we otherwise see ourselves being left behind," he said. "I am very concerned that we are becoming slaves to our own technology. Technology emerges from a society of smart people doing cool things, with the intent of making the world a better place. But beyond creating lots of smart little gadgets, what we need is wisdom. Wisdom requires big picture thinking and restraint so we are only using technology in ways that improve our lives and the health of the ecosystems upon which all life, and our economy, depends."

While California is facing its housing needs by setting and resetting goals for new housing units – in 2024 the state set a threshold of 2.5 million new units it intends to build by 2030 – the issue of defensible viability of these vast new housing projects will inevitably clash with sustainability issues and the localization of population overshoot.[36]

The old Hollywood slogan of *'Location! Location! Location!'* will undoubtedly be heard a lot more in the coming years across Los Angeles County and across the rest of the state. Los Angeles County is home to 3.6 million housing units. How much of that housing stock is located in canyons, across hillsides and along the shorelines is a more opaque figure, but suffice it to say: A lot.

Even if none of the communities that were wiped out by the wildfires of 2025 in California are rebuilt in any configuration that remotely resembles what existed before the fires, there remains a deep abundance of housing located in places that are spectacularly beautiful and yet defy reason and common sense as a place to build homes.

And yet here we are.

Short of a profound cultural enlightenment over the impacts of the human footprint and the shoes we

are wearing in America, Belmont suggests the 'where' and the 'who' and even some of the 'how' of it all will amount to little more than window dressing on our way to a date with destiny that will not turn out well for humankind.

"Systems that are unsustainable, like our current pursuit of exponential energy growth, will eventually become sustainable, by definition. The question is whether that correction happens by disaster or design. Right now, we're on the path of disaster. If we stay on this course, the question becomes will it be a series of smaller disasters that resolve the conflict – of the civilizational overlay with nature – or will it be a major one, meaning collapse," Belmont said. "Every civilization throughout history has collapsed, but we are very resilient and there is no reason we can't solve these problems. But this ultimately comes down to physics and chemistry. And physics doesn't care if we solve our problems or not."

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