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Trump attacks California over fire management

BY MIRANDA GREEN AND TIMOTHY CAMA - 10/23/18 04:07 PM EDT

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President Trump on Tuesday volleyed a number of attacks at California over the state's water practices and fire management, going so far as to threaten withholding future federal aid.

Speaking at an address to the White House State Leadership Day Conference, Trump warned California to "get on the ball" with how it manages its forests and regulates water releases from its dams, insinuating that both practices are responsible for a number of the state's devastating forest fires.

"They have lousy management," Trump said.

"This is a seriously defective thing there. I thought they had a drought. I didn't realize. They said 'no, we have so much water we don't know what to do with it.' Then you have all the forest fires. We have so much water they could actually water some of it."

As of Tuesday, about 48 percent of California's land — where about 63 percent of the state's population lives — was experiencing drought, according to the federal government's National Integrated Drought Information System.

Trump additionally threatened to withhold federal aid from the state as a result of future fires.

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"We're tired of giving California hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars all the time for their forest fires when you wouldn't have them if they manage their forests properly," he said.

While Trump's comments aimed to connect the dots between California's ongoing water debate, calls to thin forests for lumber and deadly forest fires, experts have routinely debunked the connections.

Fire chiefs said that dry conditions, warm temperatures and strong winds were primarily responsible for recent extreme fires in the Golden State — not a lack of water supply.

"We have plenty of water," Cal Fire Deputy Chief Scott McLean said earlier this year after Trump linked the state's water management to the fires. "We can pretty much get water out of streams, creeks, ponds, rivers, lakes."

Nevertheless, Trump has routinely promoted the idea that the wildfires, which many attribute to climate change, are due to forests that must be thinned and dams whose water must be redistributed. Back in August Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, along with Department of Agriculture head Sonny Perdue, made a trip to California, where they promoted the need for increased logging as a way to manage fires.

"There are years' worth of dead logs, overgrown shrubs and snags, which many firefighters call 'widow makers' because they are so deadly," Zinke wrote in a [USA Today piece](#) that coincided with the trip. "The buildup of fuels is the condition we can and must reverse through active forest management like prescribed burns, mechanical thinning and timber harvests."

The duo faced backlash from environmentalists who said that the concept of forest management was false and instead a thinly veiled guise to benefit the logging industry.

[Last week](#) Trump signed a presidential memorandum to promote the "reliable supply" of water in the West. The order directed the Interior and Commerce secretaries to identify and oversee major water infrastructure projects in California in which they could have reasonable jurisdiction under the Endangered Species Act so they could speed up environmental reviews and streamline regulations.

Interior Deputy Secretary David Bernhardt called the memorandum, in a call to reporters Friday, the "most significant action taken by a president on western water issues in my lifetime."

The debate at the heart of Trump's comments rages over the designation of waters from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta in California's Central Valley. The water is pumped to 25 million people in Southern California and the Bay Area as well as 3 million acres of farmland in the San Joaquin Valley.

But an endangered fish species whose numbers environmentalists say are getting worse called the Delta smelt also resides in the waters, and scientists argue the best way to save it is by letting the water flow directly to the Pacific Ocean.

Trump's memorandum was hailed by a number of Republican leaders in California's farm-heavy Central Valley, including Rep. Devin Nunes (R-Calif), a longtime Trump supporter who first told him of the battle

between environmentalists and farmers over the future of water in the state during Trump's presidential campaign.

"I saw it on the campaign trail and I saw it numerous times when I was out in that area. I look at these incredible, beautiful fields, and they're dry, like dry as a bone," Trump said Tuesday of his previous visit to the region.

"I said 'you must have a tremendous drought going on.' They said 'no, we have so much water we don't know what to do with it. But they don't let the water come down to us. It naturally flows to us. They won't let it. They send it out into the Pacific Ocean. Millions and millions and millions of gallons. We have the greatest farmland anywhere in the world, but they won't give us water.' "

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Mulvaney pushed NOAA to disforecasters who contradicted on Alabama: report

BY [ZACK BUDRYK](#) - 09/11/19 12:38 PM EDT

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Mulvaney pushed NOAA to disavow forecasters ...

Acting White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney instructed Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross to have the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) support President Trump's comments on the threat of Hurricane Dorian to Alabama and contradict the National Weather Service (NWS), [according to The New York Times](#).

The Times, citing three unidentified sources, reported that after the directive came down from Mulvaney, Ross called acting NOAA Administrator Neil Jacobs to tell him to ensure the agency backed Trump.

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When Jacobs objected, he was told the NOAA's political appointees would be fired if it was not carried out, according to the newspaper.

Ross's spokesman has denied earlier reporting that the Cabinet official threatened firings at the NOAA if the administration did not back the president.

Trump told reporters in the Oval Office on Wednesday that he "never" told Mulvaney to have NOAA disavow the NWS.

"That's a whole hoax by the fake news media when they talk about the hurricane and they talk about Florida and they talk about Alabama," he said.

In the wake of an unsigned NOAA statement supporting Trump, which drew condemnation from meteorologists and former NOAA personnel, Jacobs has sought to assuage concerns about political interference within the agency.

"This administration is committed to the important mission of weather forecasting," Jacobs said Tuesday at a weather conference in Huntsville, Ala. "There is no pressure to change the way you communicate or forecast risk in the future."

In the same speech, Jacobs defended Trump's insistence that the storm threatened Alabama, telling attendees "at one point, Alabama was in the mix, as was the rest of the Southeast."

Jacobs also defended the Birmingham, Ala., NWS office, which contradicted the president, according to the Times.

"The purpose of the NOAA statement was to clarify the technical aspects of the potential impacts of Dorian," he said, according to the newspaper. "What it did not say, however, is that we understand and fully support the good intent of the Birmingham weather forecast office, which was to calm fears in support of public safety."

A Commerce Department spokesman referred The Hill to Jacobs's remarks in the speech, as well as to similar comments he made in his confirmation hearings, and to the department's earlier denial that Ross threatened firings at NOAA.

The Hill has also reached out to the White House for comment.

--Brett Samuels contributed to this report, which was updated at 2:07 p.m.

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