

Los Angeles Times

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To the judges:

Paradise.

Coffey Park.

Berry Creek, Doyle, Weed.

When Greenville became another California mountain town devastated by wildfire in 2021, Los Angeles Times columnists Erika D. Smith and Anita Chabria began asking questions that political leaders did not want to hear, much less answer.

In an era of climate change and worsening wildfire and drought, should we be rebuilding tiny, vulnerable towns that are likely to burn again?

How many hashtag-strong places can we afford to rebuild when the price for each can top \$1 billion but the population is only a few hundred?

And if we don't rebuild every town, which ones should make the cut? And why?

Faced with silence from those in power, Smith and Chabria set out to explore those complicated and emotional issues with a [series of four on-the-ground columns](#) based in Greenville. For nearly a year, they talked to climate scientists, land policy experts, lawyers, politicians red and blue, and even a foul-mouthed nun with expertise in disaster aid.

But most of all, they talked with the residents who faced down the Dixie fire, which took out Greenville and about 1 million acres of California land, burning over the scars of previous wildfires with an intensity once thought impossible.

They spoke with those whose homes remain standing among the skeletal forests of burned trees; those who will rebuild no matter the cost or risk; and those desperate for a fresh start someplace safer. And people who lost everything, including loved ones.

What they found was a tragedy of political neglect playing out in slow motion. Almost no one in the administration of California's governor, Gavin Newsom, seems to be discussing the overlapping issues of climate change, forest management and housing in a cohesive or comprehensive way.

Instead, "the state is spending enormous sums to rebuild mountain towns that have burned down, while also discouraging people from moving into the wildlands where most wildfires happen, while also being slow to crack down on NIMBY cities that have long failed to build enough affordable housing, while also touting its success on combating climate change, while also failing to significantly speed up forest management projects that would reduce carbon-spewing wildfires."

About one out of every 12 homes in the state is in a high-risk zone for wildfires, though that estimate is probably low. That translates into 10 million people living in danger of fire, even as state leaders shun efforts to create a cohesive land-use policy that acknowledges the realities of climate change.

Smith and Chabria called on Newsom to take action and begin the difficult task of convening Californians to answer the hard questions of how and where we will live in coming years.

The columns included multiple data graphics and photos by Times photographer Francine Orr, who gave readers a deeper understanding of the pain, loss and danger that wildfire brings to rural communities – and the hope and resilience that can be both beautiful and misplaced.

In the [first piece](#) in the series, the columnists lay out a bold and controversial argument for not rebuilding every town that burns down.

The [second column](#) delves into the often-conservative politics of the state’s rural residents, which can lead them to question established climate science, and examines the reality that many towns being rebuilt today are in jeopardy of burning again within as little as 10 years.

Extremism is the focus of the [third installment](#), looking at how far-right provocateurs capitalize on the loss and confusion after wildfires to promote violence and division.

The [final piece in the series](#) follows the plight of two Greenville residents, Kira Wattenburg King and Kevin Goss, who came together in the wake of the Dixie fire, bonding over a desire to rebuild a life and a town they both hold dear.

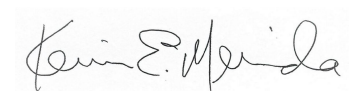
As much as the columnists hoped the couple would achieve their dream, they concluded that “we owe it to future generations to set sentimentality aside.” Instead, we must plan for a future when the planet may be hotter and drier, and when towns such as Greenville are no longer mountain idylls.

“Rebuild Reburn” represents the best of what commentary is meant to achieve: An unblinking examination of critical issues that those in power refuse to address. Through rigorous reporting, research, data and analysis, Smith and Chabria brought what had been a private conversation amongst scientists and policy experts into the public sphere.

Their work continues to force California, a state deeply enamored by a whitewashed myth of its Gold Rush origins, to confront a necessary truth: We can no longer afford to remake the past, even if we loved it.

We are proud to nominate their work for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kevin E. Merida". The signature is written in a cursive style with a light grey shadow effect behind the text.