



California Forest Watershed Alliance (CAFWA)

An alliance of urban and rural organizations dedicated to the restoration and improvement of California's watersheds and forests.

Viewpoints: Rim fire shows we need to rethink how we manage forests

Special to The Sacramento Bee

Published Sunday, Sep. 15, 2013

Yosemite is one of our nation's most treasured gems, and it sits in our very own backyard. However, when it comes to defending our rural neighbor from catastrophic wildfire, California's ability to protect this international tourist destination has proven to be limited.

The Rim fire – now the largest fire in recorded Sierra Nevada history – has shown that there are multifaceted impacts associated with rural wildfire, and that those impacts are felt in rural and urban areas alike. Federally managed land covers more than 40 percent of the state, and three out of four acres burned in California are federally owned. To make a real impact in protecting not only natural resources such as a clean water supply, good air quality and healthy wildlife habitat, but also protecting our local economies and public health, we must look at changes to policies and programs at the federal level.

When a fire hits, fire crews are deployed to begin thinning the forests, creating fuel breaks and back-burning the fire to starve it of fuel. These steps are designed to bring the fire down from the treetops to the ground, where crews can contain it. While these techniques are often effective, why not conduct them before fire threatens to devastate the land and local communities? Doing so is far cheaper and more effective than fighting mega-fires after they occur.

Strategically reducing overgrown brush and smaller trees with mechanical thinning and controlled, well-contained, prescribed fires allows forests to become more resilient to natural disasters, in turn safeguarding the natural resources all Californians depend on. It is not like we don't know what to do. These practices are conducted each year by forest managers; however, their budgets are getting smaller and smaller while our forests get denser and drier.

In 1986, 21 percent of the total acres burned statewide were rated high severity – basically, total vegetative destruction. Today that number is 33 percent. This trend is likely to continue unless the density of vegetation is dramatically reduced.

While it may seem clear that more proactive forest management processes and practices need to be implemented and executed to better safeguard our forests and water supply, Congress in recent years has instead reduced the U.S. Forest Service's hazardous fuels reduction budget. Additionally, the Obama administration has proposed a further significant reduction for the 2014 budget, while the backlog of hazardous, flammable fuels in our forests continues to grow. Moreover, in many years, the funding allocated for fuels reduction gets raided to fight fires, despite FLAME Act legislation designed to halt this practice.

If the Rim fire has taught us anything, it is that healthy forests matter, not just to those living in and around those forests, but to all Californians who rely on forests for clean water, clean air and unsurpassed recreation opportunities. The increasing threat of catastrophic wildfire is why our organizations – The Nature Conservancy, California Forestry Association and Rural County Representatives of California, along with the Association of California Water Agencies – are coming together to seek new ways to promote proactive forest management practices and create solutions to a growing problem.

Rural wildfire does not discriminate, and its impacts on our water, energy, environment and economy are felt by Californians throughout the state. It is time to take a serious look at current forest management policies, to accelerate efforts to reduce forest fuels, and to expand programs to improve forest health on federal lands. To protect our natural resources and infrastructure, we must change our strategy by pre-treating our forests before the fires start.

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