



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: Don't rob from healthy forest programs to fight wildfires

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California's devastating wildfires continue to burn up our national forests and national budgets.

While 2013 was a year of record drought and wildfires in California, with the Rim fire burning more than 250,000 acres alone, 2014 is well on its way to become another record-setting year.

As a source of our clean water, clean air, and unsurpassed recreational opportunities, healthy forests are important to all Californians. The connection between high-intensity wildfires and water quality is quantifiable and real. Studies now show that better forest management reduces wildfire intensity, thus helping to safeguard water quality. Static management practices – coupled with drier, hotter conditions – have created unhealthy, highly flammable forests overgrown with vegetation.

As a result, when fires inevitably occur, they are often large, destructive, and uncontrollable. Fortunately, there are better ways to keep our forests healthy that can assist in reversing this trend. Ecologically based thinning and controlled burns are proven, cost-effective strategies to reducing the risk of high-severity wildfire, and first steps toward establishing forests that are more resilient to wildfire and other disturbances.

A recent study from the Sierra's Mokelumne River indicates that it makes economic as well as environmental sense to invest in forest fuels reduction, so why aren't we doing more of it?

One problem is a lack of funding. Each year, funds directed to taking care of our forests to reduce the risk of destructive megafires are redirected to help fight fires. The larger

and more severe the fires become, the less funding is available to reduce the risk of such fires. So large wildfires continue to become more frequent and destructive.

To end this downward spiral, the California Forest Watershed Alliance is supporting the federal [Wildfire Disaster Funding Act](#), which seeks to prevent borrowing from accounts at the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture to pay for wildfire suppression efforts when those accounts become depleted in extreme fire years.

The legislation essentially erects a “firewall” between prevention funding and fire suppression funding, ensuring that cost-effective, proactive forest management gets its fair share, while maintaining sufficient funds for suppression.

Recognizing the need for the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act, a diverse group of supporters rallied in Washington, D.C., on June 18 to voice their support for this important legislation, and to highlight the long-term impacts of the fire budget challenge. As we continue to experience longer fire seasons, the practice of transferring funds from non-fire programs to pay for emergency wildfire response will continue unless Congress adopts the solution proffered by the funding act. The bill is critically important to ensure the long-term health and sustainability of our nation’s forests.

Patricia Megason is executive vice president of Rural County Representatives of California and spokesperson for the California Forest Watershed Alliance, which also includes the Association of California Water Agencies, the California Farm Bureau Federation, the California Forestry Association and the California chapter of the Nature Conservancy.