

Three Actions We Need to Take Now to Save California's Forests

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The wildfires raging across the state, together with an epidemic of dead trees from drought, insects and disease, have created a crisis of catastrophic proportions in California's forests.

Fortunately, we need not stand idly by. This crisis has galvanized a broad range of interests to launch the California Forest Watershed Alliance (CAFWA), an urban-rural coalition representing water interests, local government, the conservation community, agriculture and the forestry sector, aligned to seek new solutions to promote proactive, science-based and ecologically sound forest management practices.

Ecologically based forest management, which includes careful thinning of overly dense forests and use of controlled burns to reduce excess forest fuels, are proven and cost-effective tools to promote healthier forests that are more resilient to drought and wildfire. Rather than "fiddling while Rome burns," we need to increase the pace and scale of ecologically based forest management.

Five years of record drought have led to a year-round wildfire season in California, with wildfires increasing in both size and severity. At the same time, dead trees from insects and disease have increased exponentially, a function of the drought and unhealthy forest conditions. The tree mortality epidemic led Gov. Brown to issue an emergency proclamation in October 2015.

Despite this effort, the U.S. Forest Service recently reported that an additional 26 million trees have died in the southern Sierra from insects and disease since last October, bringing the total tree mortality to 66 million.

Without significant change in how we manage our forests, we will continue to lose vast swaths of our forests and the many benefits that healthy forests provide. CAFWA supports common-sense reforms that promote healthy forests that are more resilient to drought, wildfire and climate change.

First, we need to increase the pace of ecologically based forest management, including, where appropriate, thinning and controlled burning. These practices can reduce the impacts of uncontrolled wildfires and promote healthier forest conditions. Implementing the Sierra Nevada Conservancy's Watershed Improvement Program is an important step in this direction.

Second, we need to increase funding for ecologically based forest management. CAFWA supports federal budget reform, such as the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act, which would set aside federal funds for fighting wildfires, leaving more funding available for proactive forest management.

CAFWA also supports a significant increase in state funding for forest thinning and controlled burning, including use of the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund where such activities have GHG benefits.

Third, we need to increase the geographic scope of forest management to address problems at a landscape scale. CAFWA supports projects like the Forest Service's South Fork American River Cohesive Strategy, which aims to promote more resilient forest conditions over more than 400,000 acres using a collaborative process. Legislation pending in Congress would encourage such an approach by authorizing the Forest Service to prepare landscape-scale environmental analyses and decisions to promote forest restoration at a large scale.

Finally, we need to make economic use of the byproducts of ecologically based forest thinning in order to fund restoration at scale. Unfortunately, biomass facilities, which produce electricity and heat from forest and agricultural byproducts in an environmentally sound manner, are closing throughout the state because they cannot compete with low-priced natural gas. Of the remaining 22 facilities, seven are likely to close in the coming months. Given the multiple benefits of ecologically based forest thinning, CAFWA supports use of state funds to support and expand forest biomass facilities.

While the threats posed to our forests by megafires and insect and disease epidemics are serious, thoughtful, proactive management can reduce these risks and increase the chance that our children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy healthy, thriving forests.

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