

Sierra forests in 'critical' danger from fire

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(Photo: AP)

They say the danger couldn't have been demonstrated any more clearly than by that mushroom cloud of smoke churning over the Sierra one September afternoon.

The massive King Fire, still smoldering after blasting through more than 150 square miles of kiln-dry timber west of Lake Tahoe, is an example of things to come with increasing frequency unless big changes are made, according to a new report issued by a California state agency representing 22 Sierra counties.

The report's conclusions are in line with concerns issued by elected leaders of at least 10 of those counties who recently declared state of emergencies due to overgrown, drought-dried forests ready to erupt into flame at any time.

"We're seeing fire behavior that is extreme. We've got to do something," said Jim Branham, executive director of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, which was in the final stages of completing its State of the Sierra Nevada's Forest report when the King Fire erupted just east of Placerville, Calif.



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The blaze, allegedly set by an arsonist Sept. 13, exploded into remarkable fury four days later, chewing through 15 miles of timbered terrain in a matter of hours.

"The fire behavior that occurred that particular day models couldn't predict. All (firefighters) could do is get out of the way," Branham said.

The blaze occurred a year after the Rim Fire, a so-called megafire, burned more than 400 square miles of forest in and near Yosemite National Park. Both fires sent choking clouds of smoke into Reno's skies.

The conservancy's report states that many Sierra forests are now in "critical condition" and sites an urgent need to increase the pace and scale of ecological forest restoration, including forest thinning and the use of controlled burning.

The massive fires that will otherwise result will come with widespread implications, including damage to watersheds that provide more than 60 percent of California's water supply, diminished air quality, loss of critical wildlife habitat and costly impacts to recreation, the report concludes.

"You look at what's happening out there on the landscape and it's a serious situation that has lots of widespread implications," Branham said. "We felt we had to put this stake in the ground and say that the conditions out there are very serious. The consequences of staying on the path we're on are really substantial."

The conservancy is preparing an action plan designed to address the issue, with the process involving state, federal and local entities. One central goal is to determine exactly how much forest needs to be treated and how that work can be paid for.

Forest Service officials have estimated that 500,000 acres of national forest in California are in need of treatment, at least two to three times greater than current efforts, the report said. The conservancy hopes to identify more precisely what needs to occur across the Sierra on a watershed-by-watershed basis, Branham said.

Significant obstacles exist. Among them is a shortage of lumber mills that can handle marketable timber removed during forest health projects. Another is a lack of biomass facilities that can process smaller, unmarketable trees and forest debris removed during the same work.

The conservancy's call to action comes as county supervisors in the Sierra's 22 California counties consider declaring state of emergencies due to poor forest health and extreme fire danger on national forest land. At least 10 counties have already done so.

"I think we'll have 100 percent compliance pretty soon," said Paul Roen, chairman of the Sierra County Board of Supervisors. Sierra County, which borders Nevada, was the first to declare a state of emergency in August.

Roen watched the King Fire explode Sept. 17 and said it was miraculous that a dozen firefighters temporarily trapped by flames that day didn't perish.

"The severity of these fires is absolutely astonishing," Roen said. "Every fire is more aggressive and more catastrophic and it's going to continue to be that way until we do something about it."