

VIEWPOINTS

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Fires show need for action in the Sierra

By MIKE CHRISMAN
Special to The Bee

As firefighters continue their valiant efforts battling the King fire – the latest large fire in the Sierra Nevada – an important new report makes a compelling and sobering case for bold and urgent action.

“The State of the Sierra Nevada’s Forests,” issued by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, details the dire conditions of many of the region’s forests that are putting them at grave risk of large, damaging fires, such as the King fire and last year’s Rim fire. It further points out that the trend of increasing temperatures and drought conditions is literally “adding fuel to the fire.”

Fires in California’s primary watershed – more than 60 percent of the state’s developed water supply originates here – deliver a wide range of severe adverse impacts. These range from dramatic decreases in air quality to setting the stage for massive erosion dirtying our water and decreasing the storage capacity of our reservoirs.



Air quality the past two weeks has been several times worse than some of the most polluted cities in the world due to smoke from the King fire. Last year’s Rim fire emitted greenhouse gases equivalent to 2.3 million vehicles for a year.

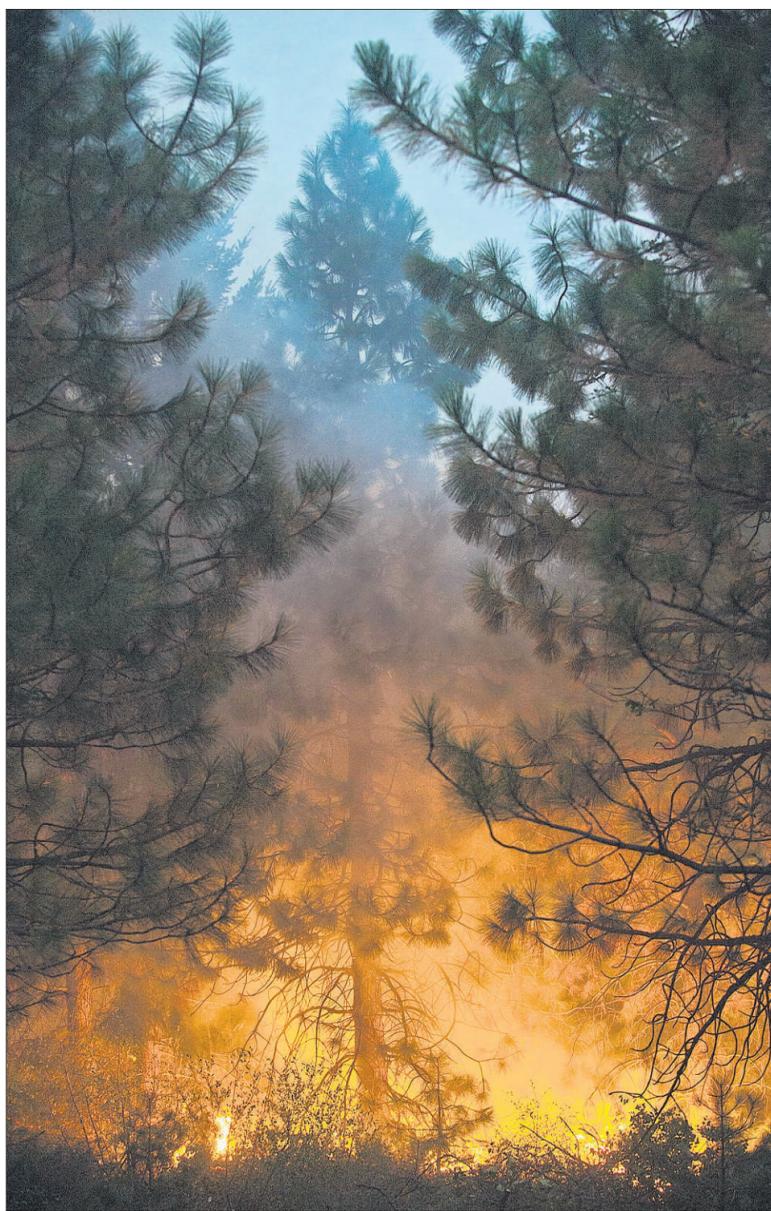
Also, the lost habitat and recreational opportunities from major fires like these are significant. It is not an exaggeration to say that virtually all Californians are affected when these “megafires” occur.

The report points out that wildfires are getting larger and burning at higher intensity than ever before. The Rim fire burned at nearly 40 percent high intensity – meaning virtually no living vegetation is left – covering almost 100,000 acres. More acres have burned in the first 4½ years of this decade than in seven decades of the last century.

What can we do about it? It starts by understanding the situation. Conflict over forest management and the lack of necessary resources have led many of the forests managed by the federal government in the region to become badly overgrown and at risk of large, damaging fires. The U.S. Forest Service indicates that between 6 million and 9 million acres of the land they manage in California are in need of restoration; much of that land is in the Sierra Nevada.

The solution, significantly increasing the pace and scale of science-based ecological restoration of these forests, seems simple enough. Thinning the forest and, where feasible, using controlled fire as a tool will dramatically improve forest health and reduce the risk of these types of uncontrolled wildfires.

We know that the cost of restoring these for-



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The King fire burns in El Dorado County on Sept. 18. A new report details the dire conditions that are putting many of the Sierra Nevada region’s forests at grave risk of such large, damaging fires.

ests is much cheaper than the cost of fighting the fires and restoring the burned areas. However, making that happen is complicated and will require increased financial investment and a serious review of the policies and processes impeding progress. Digging out of the hole we are in won’t be easy.

Perhaps we can learn from an effort that has been underway for more than a decade to save an important Sierra Nevada icon, Lake Tahoe. Realizing that the deteriorating quality of Lake Tahoe needed the same bold and urgent action, state, federal and local officials came together to create the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program.

The program clearly identifies the objectives and actions needed to “keep Tahoe blue” and comes with a commitment on the part of all parties to work together to achieve these goals. California, Nevada and the federal government have invested more than \$1.69 billion since its inception, and significant progress is being made.

The challenges facing the Sierra Nevada ob-

viously exist at a much greater scale across an area that makes up one-quarter of the state. However, the time is right for just such an integrated effort between our state and federal governments, as well as those benefiting from these forested watersheds.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy, as a state agency uniquely focused on this region, has been at the center of bringing interests as diverse as the environmental community, the wood products industry and local government together to build a consensus for the need to act and to do so urgently. That foundation can be used to launch a bold effort to restore this magnificent landscape, an “Environmental Improvement Program” for the Sierra Nevada.

The alternative, and consequences, of remaining on the path we are traveling should be unacceptable to all of us.

Mike Chrisman is the former secretary of the California Natural Resources Agency (2003-10).

Law on water wells is overdue protection

By TIMOTHY QUINN
AND LESTER SNOW
Special to The Bee

California made history recently when Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act. Its passage marks a once-in-a-century achievement, for it was 100 years ago that California enacted the first comprehensive legal framework for managing surface water. The bills Brown signed into law maintain that legal framework while establishing a long-overdue system for managing groundwater resources.

Developing this new statewide policy did not come about easily, but that’s often the case when tackling tough problems. Brown, Sen. Fran Pavley and Assemblyman Roger Dickinson led a bipartisan, collaborative effort to pass real and meaningful groundwater reforms with numerous stakeholder meetings dating back to January. As a result of their commitment, and the participation of water districts, businesses, farmers and conservationists in the process, California no longer carries the dubious distinction of being the only state in the West without statewide standards and requirements in place for managing groundwater.

Despite the public hearings and meetings, there is a lot of misinformation about the new law and speculation about what implementation might look like. A central feature of these bills, and the reason we supported them, is that they are based on local agency control and flexibility. Even the governor’s signing message noted “a central feature of these bills is the recognition that groundwater management in California is best accomplished locally.”

We couldn’t agree more. The legislation clearly gives local agencies the authority and tools to assess the conditions of their local water basins and take the necessary steps to balance them. Specifically, local agencies have two years to create local groundwater sustainability agencies and five to seven years after that to complete groundwater sustainability plans. Once in place, they have 20 years to fully implement them. The legislation also includes numerous provisions to protect water and property rights. Specifically, it does not affect existing surface water or groundwater rights.

It is also important for water managers and farmers struggling with the drought and deep cuts in surface water deliveries to keep in mind that this groundwater legislation is just one essential component of the California Water Action Plan put forth by the Brown administration this year.

Proposition 1, the water bond, will provide \$100 million for implementation of sustainable groundwater management plans if passed. The legislation, which was a necessary complement to the water bond, will empower local agencies to manage groundwater basins in a sustainable manner for the long haul. It will not have an impact on current emergency measures in place to respond to this drought. We can ensure a reliable water supply for California, but only when we combine the water bond and groundwater sustainability with conservation, water recycling, expanded storage, safe drinking water, wetlands and watershed restoration.

The state’s third year of drought focused everyone’s attention on the magnitude of our water problems and created the momentum for action during this year’s legislative session. But overlooked by many – the media included – were the months of stakeholder meetings, public hearings and negotiations on how best to address California’s groundwater crisis, which brought us to the historic moment where Brown signed the legislation.

With the signing behind us, we look forward to working with agricultural and other diverse interests to ensure the law is implemented successfully. The real work begins now as local agencies start to form groundwater sustainability agencies, use new tools to further investigate their groundwater basins and create their groundwater sustainability plans.

We are committed to successful implementation. We believe that in the near future we will look back on this time as a turning point in securing reliable, long-term water supplies for California’s vital agricultural economy.

Timothy Quinn is executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies. Lester Snow is executive director of the California Water Foundation.



Timothy Quinn



Lester Snow

Big cities thrive with strong-mayor plan

By ROB TURNER
Sactown Magazine

When I moved back home to Sacramento in 2004 after a decade in New York, I could hardly believe all of the exciting projects on tap for my hometown. From 2004 to 2007, my wife and I attended seemingly endless public discussions about civic projects like the riverfront, the railyard and, of course, the arena. Sacramento’s exciting future was the talk of the town.

Unfortunately, that’s all it ended up being – talk. Project after project fizzled, all in the midst of a national economic boom that was spurring other cities to new heights.



In Sacramento? Here we talked. So what held us back? In most big cities, citizens look to their mayors to take decisive action. But here, the mayor’s vote carries the same weight as those of the other eight City Council members. There isn’t one leader; there are nine. That’s like having nine governors in one state, or nine CEOs at one company. No one is truly in charge. How can that possibly be?

That’s fine for small cities. But cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Fresno, Oakland and San Diego have all moved to the so-called “strong mayor” or “executive mayor” system. In fact, of the 25 largest U.S. cities, more than two-thirds are now governed this way. When Gov. Jerry Brown was Oakland’s mayor, he successfully pushed for the executive system there, arguing that it “counterbalances the parochialism of council districts.” In other words, it allows

the mayor to act in the best interests of the *entire* city.

So why is Sacramento content with this weak-mayor system? Where did *we* get the monopoly on wisdom?

On Nov. 4, Sacramento can join those cities by passing Measure L. The crux of this measure is that Sacramento mayors would no longer sit on the City Council. They would propose budgets, have the authority to hire and fire department heads, and make other key decisions now made by the unelected city manager. The mayor would also be able to veto certain council actions. There are other points, too, but those are the big ones. It probably sounds a lot like what you thought mayors already did.

The opposition argues that giving one person so much “power” has the potential to lead to corruption. Their other major platform: Things seem to be working pretty well now.

These are wildly specious arguments. First, Measure L dictates that any mayoral veto can be overturned by six council members. Secondly, it mandates “voter reapproval” in 2020. Both Oakland and San Diego had similar requirements and, notably, both voted a second time to reaffirm the system. In Fresno, a decade after the city instituted its own strong-mayor system, The Fresno Bee opined, “One thing is certain: It’s far better than the old system.”

And the opposition’s oft-cited example of how the current system is working just fine is that Sacramento kept the Kings and funded an arena. But, in fact, the arena almost *didn’t* happen.

In 2012, the arena project was nearly killed. The NBA’s deadline for producing a financing package

for a new arena was March 1. Without one, the team could move to Seattle. The council met Feb. 7 to decide whether or not to require a public vote to use parking revenue to help fund the arena. However, the public vote would not happen until June – after the NBA’s deadline – effectively ending the Kings’ reign here.

The council was split, resulting in a narrow 5-4 decision that forged a path for the new arena. Had just *one* more council member opted for the public vote, the team likely would have left. However, in a strong-mayor system, had that happened, the mayor could have vetoed the decision.

So it wasn’t our weak-mayor system that helped keep the Kings here. It was the 2012 City Council that helped keep the Kings here (barely). If former council members who had opposed public funds for an arena had still been in office, the mayor would have had no recourse.

As for the corruption argument, this charge has been made before. In 1990, the city and county considered a merger that would have made this America’s seventh-largest city. And the issue of a stronger mayor to oversee the merged metropolis was also criticized by opponents over fears of corruption.

In response, former City Councilman and then-Sacramento County Supervisor Grantland Johnson told The Sacramento Bee, “Certainly there could be incompetence, there could be corruption, there could be graft, but that can occur – and has occurred, I would submit – under a city manager form of government.”

And on June 11, 1990, the council voted 6-2 to support the stronger mayor form of governance. Among the six council members

who voted to give the mayor veto power over the council: Mayor Anne Rudin, and then-future Sacramento Mayors Joe Serna and Heather Fargo. Yes, the same Heather Fargo who lost to Kevin Johnson and now opposes mayoral veto power.

The charter change never happened, however, because the merger never transpired. But then-Councilman Serna was passionate in his response to the opposition, telling The Bee, “(They’re) saying, ‘Take this gigantic city ... and run it like a village.’”

So, instead of focusing on what *could* go wrong with an executive mayor system, why don’t we consider what could go right? Could decisions be made faster, allowing us to compete more effectively? Could we attract a deeper talent pool of mayoral candidates? Could we benefit from having someone looking out for the best interests of the *whole* city rather than just one district?

In a manner frustratingly consistent with our outdated system, we’ve been talking about this for six years. Some council members have asked, “What’s the hurry?” The city needs more study, they said in 2008; more time, they asked for in 2010; more discussion, they pleaded in 2012. This is how a weak-mayor system operates. This is why progress comes slowly here. This is why we need change.

It’s time, Sacramento, for a little less conversation, and a little more action, please.

Rob Turner is the co-editor in chief of Sactown Magazine. A longer version of this article originally appeared in Sactown Magazine (www.sactown-mag.com/).