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Report: Sierra Nevada forest health in rapid decline



This image of smoke from the nearby King Fire was taken the evening of Friday, Sept. 19. According to the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, forests throughout the Sierra are in grave danger, partly due to wildfires.

AUBURN, Calif. — A report released this week shows that many Sierra Nevada forests are in critical condition, and that natural benefits they provide — such as clean air and water — are at risk from large, intense fire.

Sierra watersheds are the origin of over 60 percent of California developed water supply, and store significant amounts of carbon. According to the report, the current drought and a changing climate are rapidly intensifying the situation in the Sierra.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy's "State of Sierra Nevada Forests Report" compiles current science and research that tells the story of a region of great value to the state in extreme danger.

According to the report, Sierra communities and forests are faced with unprecedented fire danger due to current forest conditions, and numerous other values such as air quality, water supply, wildlife habitat, tourism and recreation, and carbon storage are at risk.

In order to protect these values, the report highlights the urgent need for an increase in the pace and scale of ecological forest restoration in the Sierra.

"The health of many of our Sierra forests is not good and getting worse," said Jim Branham, executive officer of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. "Failing to understand the urgency of the situation and act appropriately will have devastating consequences to California's environment and economy."

The 25 million-acre Sierra Nevada region encompasses one-quarter of the state, and all or part of 22 counties. In addition to serving as California's primary watershed and storing vast amounts of carbon, Sierra forests provide clean air, provide habitat for hundreds of wildlife species, and are a world-renowned tourist destination.

The report cites research that indicates the size and severity of wildfires has been increasing, and with that comes increased post-fire erosion in Sierra streams and reservoirs, increased greenhouse gas emissions, higher levels of air pollution from smoke, loss of recreational opportunities, loss of critical habitat, and negative impacts to local economies.

The report identifies specific obstacles that need to be addressed in order to put Sierra Nevada forests on a path to ecological health and protect California's air and water quality. The report also calls for a commitment from a variety of state, federal and local entities to address these challenges.

Based on the conclusions in the report, the Conservancy is developing an action plan to address the issues. Officials there intend to use a collaborative approach in doing so, involving state, federal and local entities, as well as a wide range of stakeholders representing various interests.

"We need a dramatic increase of pace and scale of ecological restoration, especially on our federally managed lands," Branham said. "There is broad consensus on the need to act and to do so in an ecologically sound manner."

Created in 2004, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy is a state agency whose mission is to improve the environmental, economic and social wellbeing of the Sierra Nevada.

SNC has awarded over \$50 million in grants for projects to protect and enhance the health of California's primary watersheds by improving forest health, remediating mercury contamination from abandoned mines, protecting critical natural resources and reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Funding for these projects comes from Proposition 84 passed by voters in 2006.

This article was submitted to the Sun by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. For more information, to download the full report, or to review the executive summary, visit www.sierranevada.ca.gov.

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