

VALLEY VOICES OCTOBER 12, 2016 4:35 PM

Restoring forests to tame wildfires means more Valley water



BY RICHARD BAILEY

Californians have the ability to greatly reduce the likelihood of wildfire devastation in the Sierra Nevada. Making the forests a safe, healthy resource again may seem impossible, but forest restoration in other states is already producing excellent results. Besides cleaner air, healthy woodlands come with the benefit of higher levels of runoff water available to local farms and cities – exactly what our thirsty state needs.

A hundred years of fire suppression in an effort to protect homes and cities near wooded areas has created dense stands of trees and brush – kindling for the megafires in the Central Sierra for the last decade, causing long-term damage to our forests and watersheds. Restoration in the Central Sierra promises smaller, less-destructive fires, more snowmelt, improved air quality and jobs.

“Restoration” refers to the combined thinning of trees and brush, to produce healthy forests aiming for densities of about 100 years ago. Idaho, Arizona, North Dakota, Hawaii, Wyoming, Kansas and Washington are using such programs, and California appears ready to follow suit.

In photos from the nineteenth century, large trees in the Central Sierra appear widely spaced, in an open, parklike setting. Today, forests often feature a dense growth of small trees with explosive underbrush. The pattern of fires before 1900 promoted healthy growth.

“Fires would run for 30 miles low to the ground, burning grasses but leaving most of the trees intact,” according to a 2013 Scientific American report. Computer modeling gives today’s foresters the added advantage of seeing how forests will react to changes in management practices.

A national shift from suppression to restoration got underway at the turn of the 21st century after a string of disastrous wildfires. In 2002, Dale Bosworth, a second-generation forester and the 15th chief of the U.S. Forest Service, declared: “We have a serious forest health problem and ... we aren’t doing enough about it. ... On the national forests, our purpose for tree removal is not what it was 40 years ago. Today, long-term ecosystem health drives everything we do. It determines whether or not – and where and how – we decide to cut trees.”

The rising tide of wildfires resulted in the bipartisan 2003 Healthy Forests Initiative and led Congress to pass the Healthy Forests Restoration Act.

Today’s forests are part of a patchwork of passive and active management. To put this into perspective, the 2013 Rim Fire burned passively managed forests occupying 14 times the area of San Francisco and then stopped when it reached the actively managed land of Yosemite National Park.

Active management is a reality in national parks and several western states. Scientific American featured the rollout of what Arizona foresters expect to be a 20-year effort to thin dense stands of ponderosa pines at no cost to taxpayers. That’s because the contractor is allowed to keep the harvested trees and biomass.

According to California's Sierra Nevada Conservancy, "Computer modeling of the Sierra has found fuel treatments that alter the size and intensity of wildfires could reduce the amount of carbon emitted by fires from 36 to 85 percent." UC Merced professor Roger Bales estimates the thinning of a Nature Conservancy site west of Lake Tahoe by 25 to 50 percent would increase the amount of water flowing into streams from 9 to 16 percent.

Creating a wider protective band of thinned forest around foothill and mountain residential areas is not only possible but would save money in damages, provide jobs and supply much-needed water in California.

Tulare County Supervisor Steve Worthley outlined the situation from a local viewpoint: "The current devastation of the pine forest in the Southern Sierra provides a timely opportunity to revisit the passive approach to forest management. ...The science and history of our region strongly support the need to actively manage our watersheds."

Fresno Irrigation District Manager Gary Serrato offered a regional water perspective, "Proper management of our forest results in a healthier forest, less forest fires and an increase in water supply. Additional runoff allows for additional supplies for agriculture, urban and environmental purposes."

And, according to Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Tulare, "Routine forest thinning is a common-sense conservation measure that helps to prevent the spread of fires and improves water flows and the sustainability of wildlife habitats."

Isn't it time to take serious steps toward restoring our forests?

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