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Opinion

California Rambling: Worth of water — the solutions

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“We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them.”

— Albert Einstein

A century of wildfire suppression, four years of drought and restoration practices that replanted burned and harvested forests with plantations of similar trees have led to a crisis in the Sierra Nevada that threatens a watershed that supplies 60 percent of the water used in California, sustains 60 percent of the state’s wildlife and is essential to our populace, economy, environmental quality and way of life.

This is a man-made problem whose solution, as Einstein stated, cannot be achieved with the same level of thinking that created it.

The Sierra Nevada forest became unnaturally overpopulated primarily because of years of wildfire suppression that allowed forests to become more congested than is natural. In the late 1900s, fewer trees began being cut after environmental regulations and cheaper foreign lumber put loggers and mills out of business. The result is that high-intensity wildfires have increased in size and frequency.

Today not a single active sawmill is processing raw timber into lumber in El Dorado County. Very few remain anywhere in the Sierra. Eldorado National Forest Supervisor Laurence Crabtree said, “If I were to offer a sale (of timber) today, there’s no one locally to buy and process the logs. The cost of trucking logs to a distant mill substantially reduces the value of the public’s timber.”

The decline of California’s forest products industry has had serious consequence on the ability of local contractors and wood processing companies to compete successfully for U.S. Forest Service contracts against larger, often out-of-state businesses with lower overhead and operational costs.

Not only are there fewer and smaller companies of loggers and sawmills to reduce fire danger and improve forest health, but the USFS has lost revenue from timber sales that previously helped fund forest restoration.

The USFS manages 6.3 million acres in the Sierra Nevada, about 60 percent of the range’s total forested area. It estimates that 500,000 acres of forest will need to be treated annually (two to three times greater than current efforts) in order to restore the watershed.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency, reports that very little progress is being made in the pace and scale of watershed restoration, quoting the USFS that “only an environmental restoration program of unprecedented scale can alter the direction of current trends.”

To help build a consensus on what to do, the Sierra Nevada Forest and Community Initiative, established five years ago, brings together diverse perspectives from local government, environmental and conservation organizations, the wood products industry, fire safe councils and public land management agencies.

The group’s biggest impediments are funding and what to do with the biomass cleared from the forests.

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Presently, when a forest is thinned or cleared, logs are piled and burned (as there are few mills to process the timber and no market for it), but doing so on 500,000 acres of forest annually would ruin air quality, create a massive release of greenhouse gases, affecting climate and greatly damage recreation, tourism and quality of life in the Sierra.

In its report, “The State of the Sierra Nevada’s Forests,” SNC states that diverting the biomass generated by these forest treatments from pile and burn to bioenergy could reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 3.15 million metric tons annually. Over 10 years that would be the equivalent of eliminating the emissions of 3.9 million cars.

There are 14 biomass power plants in the Sierra Nevada today, with inadequate capacity “to handle the pace and scale of restoration” SNC reported. It described a 2013 incident in which the Honey Lake biomass power plant stopped all chip deliveries in mid-summer at a time when forest restoration was in full swing and places that would accept forest biomass were in high demand.

Without a place to dispose of the biomass that summer, a number of proposed restoration projects could not be completed.

Limited options to restoring the watershed, through logging, result in publicly unpopular choices, such as increased use of planned or prescribed fires (set intentionally to remove unwanted vegetation).

Local air districts impose very tight burn windows and durations of prescribed fires, which can complicate their implementation, resulting in the unintended consequence of enabling larger, more damaging fires, which emit more pollution than would have been released by controlled burns.

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Despite funding, biomass disposal and prescribed fire limitations, a number of collaborative watershed restoration projects have been conducted in Fresno, Amador, Calaveras, Shasta, Placer, Madera, Plumas and El Dorado counties, including \$5 million allocated by the USFS to reduce fuel and help restore the Eldorado National Forest watershed.

In the Caples Lake watershed, Eldorado National Forest and the El Dorado Irrigation District are partners in trimming selectively, creating fire breaks, conducting controlled burns with ground crews and by helicopter in remote areas to create multi-age stands, and restoring the forest and its watershed to a more natural and fire-resistant condition.

Nevertheless, what’s being done to restore the Sierra Nevada watershed is virtually a drop in the bucket. It is a problem that only can be solved by thinking and acting at a different level.

The third and final part of this series will describe benefits of restoring the watershed.