

SOAPBOX DECEMBER 6, 2016 1:00 PM

How logging proponents ignore science in the Sierra



Firefighters with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection remove dead trees in a Sierra Nevada forest near Cressman in June. **Scott Smith** - Associated Press

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Special to The Bee

The U.S. Forest Service recently estimated that 102 million trees have died in California's forests since 2010. In response, Amy Horne and Jim Branham suggest logging "millions of acres" in national forests to save them ("A new, better way to deal with dead trees in Sierra," Viewpoints, Nov. 30.)

However, they have stretched the truth on key issues. They claim we have "too many trees," both dead and alive. Yet the Forest Service says that the 102 million dead trees represent only about 2 percent of all trees in the 33 million acres of California's forests. Even when drought and fire are combined, only 6 percent of Sierra Nevada forests are composed mostly of dead trees. Historically, before fire suppression and logging, it was 14 to 20 percent.

The authors also suggest that current Sierra forests are more than 10 times denser than in the past. This is mythology. Current science concludes that there has been a modest increase in trees per acre – about 30



percent – but our forests are 19 percent less dense than in the past.

Horne and Branham assume large numbers of dead trees cause fires to “become extreme.” Yet the most current studies consistently find that forests with the most dead trees do not burn more intensely. They often burn less intensely, because combustible oils in pine needles begin to dissipate quickly after trees die.

Nor does fire “destroy wildlife habitat.” This is an outdated view. Recently, more than 250 scientists informed Congress that patches of mostly dead trees are “quite simply some of the best wildlife habitat in forests.”

Finally, the authors claim that increasing logging of our public forests will curb large wildfires. They misunderstand the issue. Hot, dry, windy weather rather than forest density determines fire intensity and spread.

Let’s let science be our guide, rather than superstition and outdated assumptions.

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