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Forestry deal could bring jobs to region

Mokelumne River watershed to be protected

By Terry Grillo terry@calaverasenterprise.com Updated 15 hrs ago



Enterprise photo by Terry Grillo

Alpine County Supervisor Terry Woodrow, who is also vice chairman of the Upper Mokelumne River Watershed Authority, left Wednesday as U.S. Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region Forester Randy Moore signs a 10-year agreement to perform maintenance work in the region. Former Calaveras County Supervisor Steve Wilensky, a founding member of the Amador-C Consensus Group, is on the right.

The head regional forester for the U.S. Forest Service in California, Hawaii and the Pacific islands and officials representing the Upper Mokelumne River Watershed Authority Wednesday signed a 10-year deal that is expected to bring new jobs to the region and thin forests to reduce wildfire risk and improve water yields and quality.

The agreement was signed by Randy Moore, Pacific Southwest regional forester for the USFS and Terry Woodrow, vice chairwoman of the watershed authority and Fourth District Alpine County Supervisor.

Tens of millions of dollars could flow to grant-funded forest restoration and watershed management in the tri-county area, funds that the authority can spend on local contractors, said Steve Wilensky, founding member of the Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group, a community-based organization that works to build fire-safe communities, healthy forests and watersheds, and strong local economies. The consensus group was a contributor to the agreement.

“I think this is the future of how we will manage our national forests,” said Moore. “This will increase the pace and scale of landscape treatment.”

Sierra Nevada forests and watersheds are at a crucial point. A four-year drought, a century of fire suppression, widespread tree mortality due to insect attacks and disease and a changing climate have led to an increased risk of large, damaging wildfires, according the Watershed Improvement Project, a combined effort between the state’s Sierra Nevada Conservancy and the Forest Service.

Moore said Forest Service plans for California include performing forest restoration on 500,000 acres a year, “and that’s when we will begin to make a difference.” He added that 240,000 acres each year are being treated now. He said 9 million acres need forest restoration work.

“Now more of our budget is going to fire suppression,” he said. “Agreements like this can reduce the need for fire suppression and we can spend more on treatment.”

“We’ve been building this agreement for about six years,” said Woodrow. “We’re going to employ local contractors, and improve the forests and watersheds.”

She added, “The relationship between clean and abundant watersheds and a healthy forest has become very apparent.”

“The relationship between healthy watersheds and healthy forests is a direct one,” said Calaveras Ranger District Ranger Teresa McClung. “You can’t have one without the other.”

Wilensky said that too often in the past, water and forestry issues were addressed separately. “Now forest, fire and water people will work together and that’s huge,” he said.

The watershed authority is comprised of six water agencies, Amador Water Agency, Calaveras County Water District, Calaveras Public Utility District, East Bay Municipal Utility District, Jackson Valley Irrigation District and Alpine County Water Agency, and the governments of Amador, Calaveras and Alpine counties. They serve as the regional water management group for the Mokelumne-Amador-Calaveras Region. The goal is to enhance water supply and protect water quality and the environment.

The agreement covers an area known as the Cornerstone Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration project, which lies within the Amador Ranger District of the Eldorado National Forest and the Calaveras Ranger District of the Stanislaus National Forest.

The consensus group developed the Cornerstone Project and in 2012 federal officials selected it as one of 23 projects nationwide to be awarded funds to actively manage forestlands to reduce fire hazard and improve water quality.

Since 2012, crews have removed hazardous fuels from more than 14,000 within the Cornerstone region. The consensus group will play a key role in the implementation of the agreement.

Moore said the consensus group has received between \$250,000 and \$750,000 annually for the past four years for forest restoration projects. The Wednesday agreement is expected to increase that grant-funded amount.

“While we have brought millions of dollars into the area over the last several years, this master stewardship agreement will increase that exponentially,” said Wilensky. “This represents a sea change in how we acquire funding.”

None of the officials, however, could offer any specifics on how much money will be coming.

Still, Wilensky said synergy between the various agencies involved means “We are only limited by our capacity to apply for grant funding.”

Moore said he is close to obtaining approval for a Forest Service contract that would favor bids from local forest project providers over firms that are based nationally. “Rather than going out to bid nationally, we will be able to concentrate on local contractors,” he said.

Both Moore and Wilensky applauded the inclusion of the East Bay Municipal Utility District in the agreement. They said the water district based in Alameda and Contra Costa counties serves more than 1.4 million customers and watershed maintenance and forest restoration is fundamental to providing clean drinking water to those customers.