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Sierra Nevada Forest Health: From Bad To Worse



Tree Mortality In Sierra Nevada

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B.J. Hansen, MML News Director

Sonora, CA — A new report details the health of California's forestland along the Sierra Nevada, and the findings paint a bleak picture.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy, which was created by California lawmakers in 2004, first put out a report looking at the health of Sierra Nevada in 2014. At the time, conditions appeared to be at an "all-time worse." The Sierra Nevada had just experienced the 2013 Rim Fire, and the report noted that restoration efforts in the Sierra were grossly out of pace with what was needed, and overgrown forests were starting to show signs of stress after only two years of drought.

There was no mention in the 2014 report, however, of the term "tree mortality."

An updated report, just released, says, "What came next poured fuel on an already raging fire."

Since 2014, 80-million trees have died as a result of bark beetle infestation and 30-million were killed by wildfire. The King Fire in late 2014 burned nearly 100,000 acres in the Upper American River Watershed and the Butte Fire in 2015 consumed 70,000 acres in the Calaveras and Mokelumne River Watershed.

Three main factors were identified that have led the Sierra Nevada's forest health to plunge downward over the past three years. They are overgrown forests, two additional years of extreme drought and experiencing one of the warmest winters on record.

Despite sophisticated fire suppression efforts, more acres have burned this decade along the western slope of the Sierra Nevada than any previously recorded decade. Nearly 1.2 million acres have burned since 2010 and there are still three fire seasons to go. The decade starting in 2000 burned the second most acreage at just under 1.2-million. During the fifties, sixties and seventies, around 500,000 acres would burn during a given decade. Many forests now host 300 to 400 trees per acre, when previously there would be 50-80, according to the report.

Catastrophic fires, combined with tree mortality, are also having a negative impact on wildlife habitat, the forest's ability to store carbon, reducing tourism dollars, and increasing greenhouse gas emissions. The report specifically notes that Tuolumne County had about \$275,000 in less income than what it was anticipating from the occupancy tax on hotels during the 2013 Rim Fire. In addition, the Rim Fire released more greenhouse gas emissions in its smoke plume than the City of San Francisco produces in a year.

In hopes of finding a solution to the dire situation, the end of the report presents "A Path Forward," with a plan to improve forest health. It calls for increasing investment in watershed restoration by seeking state, federal and private funding.

It also calls for addressing "policy and process constraints." This includes making changes to state and federal regulatory processes, as well as changing air quality regulations to allow more prescribed burns.

It also proposes developing additional infrastructure to utilize biomass. This includes maintaining and upgrading the existing biomass facilities, expanding technologies through state and federal funding, and providing incentives for the creation of infrastructure.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy provides only recommendations to state officials and is not a regulatory agency. You can find the complete report by [clicking here](http://www.sierranevada.ca.gov/our-work/docs/SOSv2webPrint.pdf) (<http://www.sierranevada.ca.gov/our-work/docs/SOSv2webPrint.pdf>).

Written by [BJ Hansen](mailto:bjhansen@clarkebroadcasting.com) (<mailto:bjhansen@clarkebroadcasting.com>).

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