



Speak Your Piece: Without forest restorations, carbon fight is futile

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You may be an eco-conscious Californian. You might drive a hybrid car and have solar panels on the roof. You want to do your part to slow global warming.

Good for you, that's your prerogative. But I have bad news: Those efforts will be fruitless if a carbon crisis in the making isn't addressed. I'm not talking about coal-fired power plants in China — though they're a serious problem. I'm talking about our own California backyard.

Forests are one of the few ways we can offset the carbon dioxide emissions of our cars and power plants. Trees breathe CO₂ and turn it into wood that, at least in theory, can lock up carbon for centuries. And who doesn't like the idea of growing majestic trees while helping the climate?

Just one problem: The forests of the Sierra Nevada, though strictly protected, aren't aging into towering old-growth groves. On the contrary, they're burning up in catastrophic megafires with carbon footprints to match.

The Rim Fire in 2013 burned an area larger than San Diego, and its smoke carried CO₂ equal to the annual tailpipe emissions of more than 2 million cars. The dead trees left in its wake emit more carbon as they decay. Yet none of those emissions are counted by the California Air Resources Board.

The Rim Fire was the largest blaze on record in the Sierra Nevada, but the relentless trend is toward larger, hotter fires. Seven of the 10 largest fires in California history have burned in the past decade. If nothing changes, blazes like the Rim Fire will soon be just another summer day. By some measures, California's forests have already flipped from a carbon sink to a net source of CO₂, worsening rather easing climate change.

With its yearly summer dry season, California's landscape is inevitably fire-prone. Forests once naturally burned every 10 to 15 years or so, thinning the forest by burning slow and low to the ground allowing for trees to survive. When a forest is healthy, it thrives on flames that clean out weak trees and underbrush, and start new cycles of growth. Unfortunately, today's Sierra Nevada forests aren't healthy. Instead of the giant, fire-resistant trees we treasure, we have firetrap thickets. The government has suppressed or "fought" fire for 80 years and as a result fires today are now catastrophic. They burn so hot that they destroy everything in their path, ruining wildlife habitat and watersheds.

The U.S. Forest Service has raised increasing alarms in the past few years over the need to restore the millions of acres of forest it manages in California, but resources for restoration and fire prevention remain scarce, even as we spend billions fighting out-of-control wildfires.

We don't have to watch in paralyzed horror as our forests burn. We don't have to wait for answers from a gridlocked federal government.

We can act.

California is raising billions of dollars in new revenue through its cap-and-trade program. The state is taxing carbon emissions and, by law, that money must go toward environmental programs that reduce our carbon footprint and help adapt to the inevitable changes the state faces. If we really care about carbon dioxide, it is essential to invest at least part of that money in forest restoration and woody bioenergy to bring California's forests back toward a healthy balance — as I propose through Assembly Bills 590 and 1345. AB 1345 would also require the

Air Resources Board to track the wildfire emissions, just as it does every other source of greenhouse gases.

Research by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy and the U.S. Forest Service demonstrates that thinning fuels and restoring our forests can shrink the state's carbon footprint. But that is just the start of the benefits of healthy, fire-resilient forests. Taming catastrophic blazes lowers firefighting costs, improves habitat for endangered wildlife, and provides more reliable water supplies.

That water doesn't just supply summer camps up in the pines. Even if you live hundreds of miles from the mountains, when you fill a glass of water, much of it probably came from a stream in the Sierra Nevada.

Scientists tell us the mountains of California have already warmed over the past century and that we can expect more. Experience tells us fire seasons have already become longer and more dangerous. And a look at our reservoirs shows water is increasingly scarce.

We know what to do to address these problems. The only question is whether we'll start acting before fire scours the forests from our Sierra watersheds.

Assemblyman Brian Dahle, R-Bieber, represents the 1st Assembly District, including the northern Sierra Nevada from Lake Tahoe to the Oregon border. Assemblyman Brian Dahle, R-Bieber, represents the 1st Assembly District, including the northern Sierra Nevada from Lake Tahoe to the Oregon border.