

SOAPBOX JULY 27, 2016 3:01 PM

# PUC is too slow dealing with dead trees



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*Special to The Bee*



When Gov. Jerry Brown appointed Michael Picker as president of the California Public Utilities Commission, Picker announced that his top priority would be protection of public safety. Last October, Brown declared an emergency for California's forests, where tens of millions of dead trees pose enormous risks for wildfires, the water supply, local communities and more.

The emergency order calls on the PUC to accelerate the development of small bioenergy facilities to convert the dead trees to renewable energy. Despite the obvious threat to public safety and the huge costs of wildfire, the commission is dragging its feet.

According to the U.S. Forest Service, there are more than 66 million dead trees in just six counties – and millions more throughout the state – due to bark beetles, drought and other factors. That number is going up quickly.

The dead trees greatly increase the risk of catastrophic fires. California has lost more acres to wildfires in the past five years than in the previous 70. In 2015, it lost almost 1,400 square miles, an area larger than the state of Rhode Island. In addition, wildfire is a huge source of air pollution and causes 10 percent of California's climate pollution. Large fires also threaten California's largest source of water and entire forest ecosystems.

Wildfire also causes significant costs for utility ratepayers. The 2015 Valley Fire, which killed four people and destroyed nearly 2,000 buildings, also caused more than \$150 million in damage to utility infrastructure. The 2013 Rim Fire burned 257,000 acres, caused \$127 million in damages and came perilously close to the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, a critical source of water and hydropower supplies. It also shut down the tourism industry in Tuolumne County, the county's largest industry, for an entire year.

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The order requires the PUC to promote small-scale bioenergy, which can convert dead and dying trees to energy. Many infected trees are too rotten for other purposes, so the alternatives are to burn them and create air pollution, or to leave them to rot where they pose fire risks. Instead, these trees can be used to create renewable power. Converting the dead trees to energy can cut air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 85 percent compared with wildfire or controlled burns.

Nine months after the emergency order, the PUC has not adopted any of the changes needed to speed development of new bioenergy facilities. We urge the commission to fulfill its mandate to protect public safety and protect ratepayers, resources and the public.

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