

OPINION MARCH 9, 2016 2:25 PM

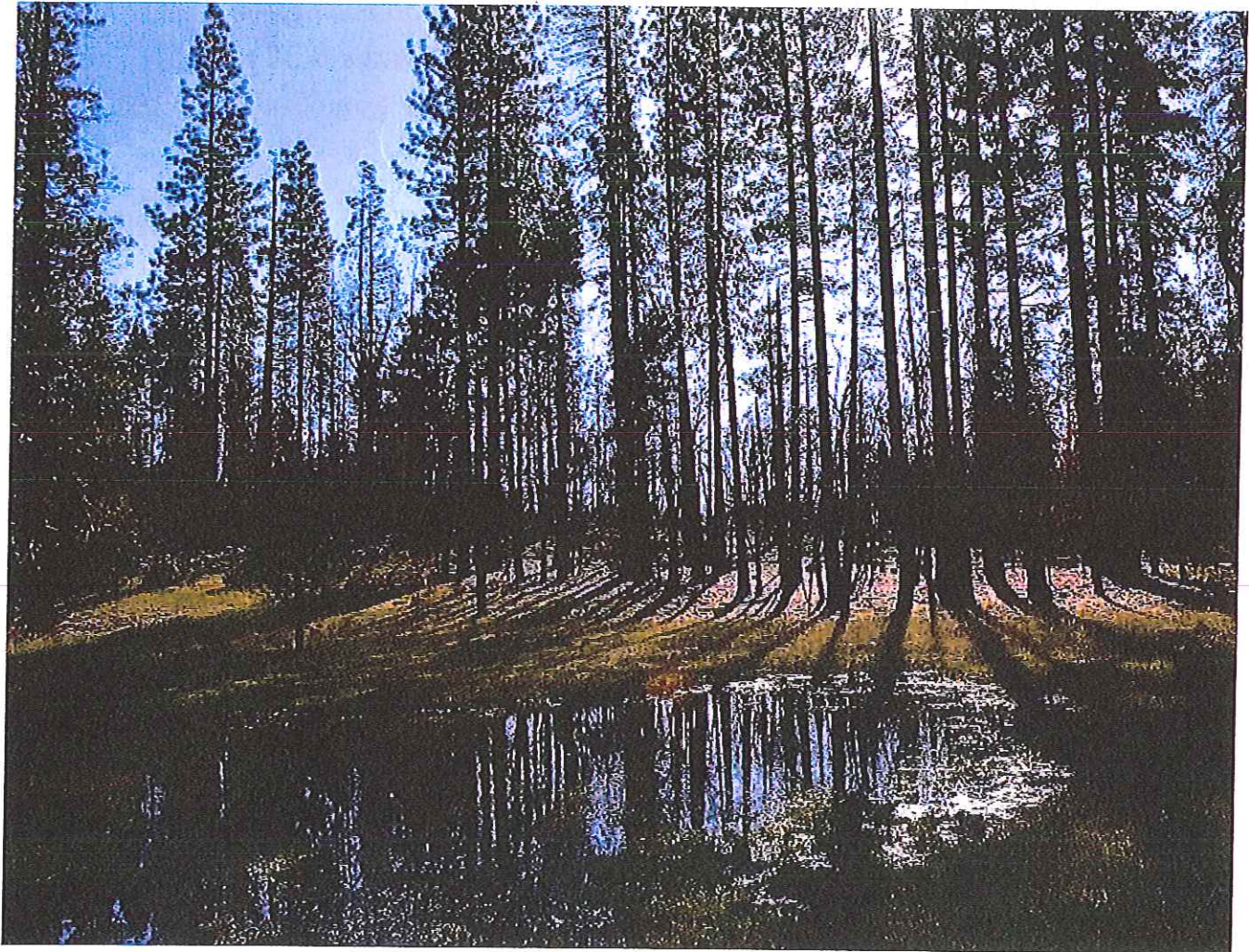
Randy Hanvelt: Action can't come soon enough for California forests

HIGHLIGHTS

State burned 893,000 acres in 2015 because of wildfires

Congress continues its efforts to reach a solution

Forest Service estimates state has 9 million acres at risk



BY RANDY HANVELT

Last year, a staggering 893,000 acres burned across California – including over 537,000 acres of national forest land. Heavy fuel loads in our national forests, combined with the effects of drought, insect, disease and climate change, mean this wildfire season could bring more destruction to the Golden State.

While there is broad agreement on the need to treat fighting wildfires like other natural disasters, this crisis demands a more comprehensive solution.

Just as there is bipartisan support for ending the harmful practice of “borrowing” from management accounts to fight wildfires, there is also bipartisan support for ensuring public forests are healthier and more resilient to catastrophic fires. In fact, last December the Obama administration, along with key Republicans and Democrats in the House and Senate, reached a deal to fix how the federal government funds wildfire suppression and to increase the pace and scale of forest-restoration projects.

In addition to allowing the Forest Service to access emergency funding to fight the largest fires, the bipartisan deal would have provided expanded authorities under existing federal environmental law to reduce fuel loads through forest thinning. This would have allowed the Forest Service to move more quickly on small projects to address wildfire risks and improve wildlife habitat, especially those that had been collaboratively developed by diverse local stakeholders.

The solution maintained protections for old-growth forests while mandating the use of the best available science to maintain forest ecology. Forestry organizations, environmental groups, tribes and wildlife groups, as well as dozens of California county supervisors most affected by wildfire, supported the package.

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Despite the best efforts of President Barack Obama and members of Congress on both sides of the aisle to include this package in omnibus budget legislation, it was ultimately blocked by the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. Though this package did not clear the final hurdle, there is a clear desire in Congress to continue efforts to reach a solution.

Congressional action can't come soon enough for California forests that haven't already been ravaged by catastrophic wildfire. The state's unreserved national forest lands, such as those not set aside as wilderness, grow the equivalent of 4 billion board feet per year. Data from 2006 to 2010, which doesn't fully reflect the current drought, indicates that annual tree mortality is 2.6 bbf. After big declines in timber harvest and other activities that reduce fire-fuel loads, just 5 percent of annual growth has been harvested since 1994.

The situation in our national forests also exasperates the effects of climate change and drought. Reducing fuel loads and tree densities should play an important role in California's efforts to confront both of these challenges. The historic Rim Fire in Stanislaus National Forest alone emitted over 11 million metric tons of greenhouse gas; this is equivalent to the emissions of 2.3 million cars or the annual emissions of 3.2 coal-fired electricity plants.

REDUCING FUEL LOADS AND TREE DENSITIES SHOULD PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN CALIFORNIA'S EFFORTS TO CONFRONT THE CHALLENGES OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND DROUGHT.

There are also the risks to public health. In many California communities during the summertime, toxins from wildfire smoke put children and other vulnerable citizens at risk.

Improving management of our national forests can also help alleviate California's drought. A study on the Sierra Nevada Watershed Ecosystem Enhancement Project detailed the influence of forest vegetation and the need for management activities to increase water supplies. Researchers from the Environmental Defense Fund and Wesleyan University found the Sierra Nevada's unnaturally dense conifer forest is responsible for the loss of more than 15 billion gallons of water per *day*.

Without an adequate supply of timber to stay in business, the state forests' infrastructure could slip away. The state has already lost 82 percent of its sawmills since 1981 and 44 of 66 biomass power plants, which turn forest waste into renewable energy. As we've seen in other states, once mills and biomass plants close, there's insufficient infrastructure to economically restore forest health.

When that happens, the environment suffers.

We should encourage our federally elected officials to support comprehensive solutions that not only treat the symptoms of catastrophic wildfires but also the causes. Merely fixing the Forest Service's budget problems will not reduce the unnatural catastrophic wildfires we are experiencing today. In California, the Forest Service estimates there is up to 9 million acres of forestland at risk of catastrophic wildfire and insects and disease; we can longer wait to protect all of the things we value in our national forests.

Randy Hanvelt represents District 2 on the Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors.



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