Opinion: Fire highlights need for upper watershed care

By Steve Frisch

As the massive Rim Fire continues to consume power lines and structures in its path, the potentially bigger story is that it is threatening delivery of water and power to San Francisco, the East Bay and hundreds of square miles of farmland. Rarely has the connection between rural natural resources, water security and urban prosperity been so abundantly clear.

All Californians share a need for predictable, clean and abundant supplies of water. The Rim Fire is a sobering reminder that our water resources are at risk; not only from wildfires but also from climate change and a legacy of poorly planned land management.



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As the Sierra Nevada is burning, legislators in Sacramento are working on a 2014 bond to invest in California water resources. Sadly, water policy leaders seem fixated on the big engineering fixes – the dams, tunnels and pumps – while ignoring the upper watersheds and forests that are essential to making the entire system work.

The Sierra Nevada range provides most of California's clean water in the form of precipitation captured and stored as snow

in the great “free reservoir” of our watersheds and forests. This water is released naturally via snowmelt for use in the rest of the state. As it flows downhill, Sierra water creates most of our reliable hydroelectric power. This hydropower is an essential reason why, according to the Southern California Leadership Council, our electrical grid is amongst the lowest in carbon emissions in the world.

Fixing the state’s water system will take decades, but these fires highlight the fact that the Sierra has real and documented needs right now. Investing in the state’s “free reservoir” is the first step in a series of linked actions needed over the next 10-20 years to effectively address the state’s water needs. Despite this, none of the water bond proposals includes any substantive funding specifically for Sierra Nevada watersheds and forests: While 60 percent of California’s developed water comes from the Sierra Nevada, only about 1 percent of California’s investment in our water resources have gone to the Sierra Nevada.

This historic and dangerous inequity must stop or we are destined to see many more catastrophic fires in our future.

Sierra Nevadans understand that addressing water storage, Delta conveyance, and clean drinking water are essential to any long-term solution; however, the only way to truly secure the safety and reliability of our urban and agricultural water resources is to address the entire system: from the Sierra to the sea. We must substantially increase investment in upper watershed and forest management, as well as forest, wet meadow, and watershed restoration in order to reduce risk from catastrophic wildfire and adapt our landscapes to a changing climate.

The 2014 water bond should specifically commit at least $600 million to upper watersheds and forests in the Sierra Nevada for ecosystem restoration. This is equal to the amount being considered for the Delta. This money can be used to protect

and restore streams and rivers, restore wetlands, treat forests, produce bio-energy, improve groundwater recharge, remediate pollution, and improve the safety and quality of California’s water supply. Only then can we achieve the state’s goals for a more resilient and secure water supply.

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