

Opinion: Time to make forests healthier

By David A. Bischel

The Rim Fire is one of the largest fires in recent California history. It highlights how every Californian has a stake in our forests, no matter how far away you are from the flames. Thousands of firefighters are working to attack the fire before it destroys the watersheds of Hetch Hetchy Reservoir – the water supply for millions in the Bay Area.

Many of our forests are overgrown because of more than a century of fire suppression and lack of forest management. Dense and unhealthy forests make fires burn hotter and faster. They then become too dangerous to attack on the ground, limiting the ability of our firefighters to contain the fire quickly.

As California experiences the effects of climate change, our forest environment will become hotter and drier. More severe and more frequent fires are predicted. About three-quarters of the state's water, millions of homes, not to mention a multibillion-dollar tourism industry, are just a few of the benefits we reap from our forests. So, suppressing fires to protect our natural resources is not bad policy in itself, but it must be matched with efforts to create stronger, healthier forests that are more resilient to wildfire.

One way to begin to strengthen our forests is to burn them. "Prescribed fire" – intentionally set and closely controlled fire – is an effective tool, and we should not ignore its benefits. In California's forests, fire is a natural process that benefits forest health by eliminating brush and trees that would fuel hotter, more intense fires. Low-intensity fires also can rid the forests of disease and insect

infestation. In the Sierra Nevada forests, where the Rim Fire is burning, low-intensity wildfires historically occurred every 10 to 20 years.

But prescribed fires have potential drawbacks, including smoke and the potential for escape, which preclude its use in many forested areas bordering homes.

Another important tool is forest thinning, which is a process of selectively removing thick vegetation while leaving the majority of larger, more fire-tolerant trees in place. Trees from the thinning can be sold to cover the cost of the program. Thinning projects put people to work, create funding for the state and protect us from dangerous, costly wildfires.

When thinning is used as a part of an integrated strategic fire-prevention approach, it can make forest lands not only resilient after wildfire but also resistant to erosion, which harms water quality. Thinning also can create openings or paths that can be used as escape routes and locations where firefighters can safely attack the flames.

Forest management tools like prescribed fires and thinning imitate natural processes so that when fires do occur, our watersheds, our wildlife and our communities are all protected.

David A. Bischel is a registered professional forester and president of the California Forestry Association.