

Opinion: Action needed to save Sierra forests

By Mike Chrisman

As firefighters continue their valiant efforts battling the King Fire – the latest large fire in the Sierra Nevada – an important new report makes a compelling and sobering case for bold and urgent action.

“The State of the Sierra Nevada’s Forests,” issued by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, details the dire conditions of many of the region’s forests that are putting them at grave risk of large, damaging fires, such as the King Fire and last year’s Rim Fire. It further points out that the trend of increasing temperatures and drought conditions is literally “adding fuel to the fire.”

Fires in California’s primary watershed – more than 60 percent of the state’s developed water supply originates here – deliver a wide range of severe adverse impacts. These range from dramatic decreases in air quality to setting the stage for massive erosion dirtying our water and decreasing the storage capacity of our reservoirs.

Air quality the past two weeks has been several times worse than some of the most polluted cities in the world due to smoke from the King Fire. Last year’s Rim Fire emitted greenhouse gases equivalent to 2.3 million vehicles for a year.

Also, the lost habitat and recreational opportunities from major fires like these are significant. It is not an exaggeration to say that virtually all Californians are affected when these “megafires” occur.

The report points out that wildfires are getting larger and

burning at higher intensity than ever before. The Rim fire burned at nearly 40 percent high intensity – meaning virtually no living vegetation is left – covering almost 100,000 acres. More acres have burned in the first 4½ years of this decade than in seven decades of the last century.

What can we do about it?

It starts by understanding the situation. Conflict over forest management and the lack of necessary resources have led many of the forests managed by the federal government in the region to become badly overgrown and at risk of large, damaging fires. The U.S. Forest Service indicates that between 6 million and 9 million acres of the land they manage in California are in need of restoration; much of that land is in the Sierra Nevada.

The solution, significantly increasing the pace and scale of science-based ecological restoration of these forests, seems simple enough. Thinning the forest and, where feasible, using controlled fire as a tool will dramatically improve forest health and reduce the risk of these types of uncontrolled wildfires.

We know that the cost of restoring these forests is much cheaper than the cost of fighting the fires and restoring the burned areas. However, making that happen is complicated and will require increased financial investment and a serious review of the policies and processes impeding progress. Digging out of the hole we are in won't be easy.

Perhaps we can learn from an effort that has been under way for more than a decade to save an important Sierra Nevada icon, Lake Tahoe. Realizing that the deteriorating quality of Lake Tahoe needed the same bold and urgent action, state, federal and local officials came together to create the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program.

The program clearly identifies the objectives and actions

needed to “keep Tahoe blue” and comes with a commitment on the part of all parties to work together to achieve these goals. California, Nevada and the federal government have invested more than \$1.69 billion since its inception, and significant progress is being made.

The challenges facing the Sierra Nevada obviously exist at a much greater scale across an area that makes up one-quarter of the state. However, the time is right for just such an integrated effort between our state and federal governments, as well as those benefiting from these forested watersheds.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy, as a state agency uniquely focused on this region, has been at the center of bringing interests as diverse as the environmental community, the wood products industry and local government together to build a consensus for the need to act and to do so urgently. That foundation can be used to launch a bold effort to restore this magnificent landscape, an “Environmental Improvement Program” for the Sierra Nevada. The alternative, and consequences, of remaining on the path we are traveling should be unacceptable to all of us.

Mike Chrisman was secretary of the California Natural Resources Agency from 2003-10.