

Fire prevention projects save us money in long run

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It's the classic pay-me-now or pay-me-later situation.

A study released last week by the U.S. Forest Service, the Nature Conservancy and the Sierra Nevada Conservancy confirmed that treating fire-prone forests in the Sierra to prevent the increasingly prevalent "megafires" would have benefits worth two to three times the cost.

The study bolsters the case for a plan before Congress that would protect funding for critical fire prevention and restoration programs that have been short-changed in recent years to pay for fighting fires.

With the number and size of massive wildfires expected to increase again this year because of warming temperatures and drought in the West, it's more important than ever that forest managers have the money they need for thinning overgrown forests and conducting controlled burns while they have the opportunity.

The 2014 fire season is just around the corner, and it could be a bad one.

Just days before the Forest Service study was released, the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, predicted "above normal significant fire potential," especially in California, which is in the grip of a disastrous drought.

And on Saturday, the journal Geophysical Research Letters reported on a study that found that the number of large wildfires increased by seven fires a year from 1984 to 2011, while the total acreage damaged by fire rose by nearly 90,000 acres. The average wildfire today is five times the size of fires in 1970.

Experts have known for a long time that treating fire-prone areas can have a major impact in preventing fires, especially fires that are burning hotter because of the large amounts of available fuel. Yet, the Forest Service spent about \$600 million fighting fires over 20 million acres of the Sierra and elsewhere in California in 2013 but only \$44.2 million clearing fuels on 123,000 acres.

Just as troubling, the Forest Service nationally spent \$1 billion to cover firefighting shortfalls last year, taking the money from forest treatment projects that would have reduced the risk of wildfires.

That's the genesis of the rare bipartisan proposal by Republican and Democratic senators to change the source of the extra funds needed to fight major fires. The senators' plan would require that when firefighting costs reach 70 percent of the 10-year average, the agencies that fight fires could dip into the government's fund for other natural disasters such as hurricanes.

That would leave money set aside for fire prevention intact. Regional forester Randy Moore said that the government needs to treat at least 500,000 acres per year in the Pacific Southwest Region, four times the amount treated in 2013.

Not doing the work, however, would be even more costly. Fighting wildfires is exceedingly expensive. It's also a dangerous business, putting firefighters in the way of fires pushed by unpredictable winds and rough terrain; last year, 19 firefighters lost their lives fighting a single wildfire in Arizona. And these megafires take a huge toll on our natural resources.

As the report from the Forest Service, Nature Conservancy and Sierra Nevada Conservancy said, spending money now would save a lot more in the future. There's no longer any reason not to.

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