

State report: Sierra forests in bad shape

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The Sierra Nevada's forests are in bad shape and getting worse, and are increasingly susceptible to catastrophic fires that scorch vast areas and damage watersheds needed to provide water to cities and farms, according to a state report issued this week.

The report by the state government's Sierra Nevada Conservancy calls for state and federal officials to double or triple the current pace of forest restoration, including more mechanical thinning of overgrown forests, more use of fire to clear undergrowth, and construction of more biomass electrical generation plants to provide a market for wood chips from restoration projects.

"Failing to understand the urgency of the situation and act appropriately will have devastating consequences to California's environment and economy," said Jim Branham, executive officer of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy.

The report notes that fires in the Sierra – such as last summer's 257,000-acre Rim Fire – are getting larger and burning hotter on average.

"The potential for more megafires like the Rim Fire is high and the trend of larger, more intense fires is clear, with the current drought and ongoing temperature increases making the situation all the more urgent," the report said.

The federal government's 2009 Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program is providing some funding for work. In Calaveras County, for example, those dollars are going to thin forests east of West Point and to restore upland meadows damaged by erosion (see related story).

But with 60 percent of California's water supply dependent on the health of Sierra forests, far more work needs to be done, according to the report. The report estimated that between 6 million and 9 million acres of U.S. forest service land needs restoration. Millions of acres of private timber lands are also at risk.

Assemblyman Frank Bigelow, R-O'Neals, who represents Calaveras County, did not have any immediate reaction to the report, according to his chief of staff, Kirk Kimmelshue. But Kimmelshue said Bigelow is well aware of the need for more intensive forest management and has in the past sought reforms to make such work easier.

"The report from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy highlights exactly why Assembly-man Bigelow authored AB 350 with Assemblyman Bob Wieckowski (D-Fremont) in 2013 to allow landowners more flexibility to safely maintain their forest land and prevent future fires," Kimmelshue said.

Bigelow's bill, which died in committee, would have allowed property owners to remove larger trees under certain circumstances without state-approved timber harvest plans.

Right now, a timber harvest plan is usually required for trees with a stump diameter of 18 inches or

larger. Bigelow's bill would have allowed removal without a harvest plan of trees with stump diameters up to 28 inches in certain situations, such as when creating fire breaks to protect communities or within 500 feet of buildings.

Many advocates for logging interests and private property owners have argued that more large trees have to be harvested in order to pay the cost of thinning forests.

Environmentalists and forest scientists say it isn't that simple because brush and small trees are what most need to be removed to improve forest health. Also, the shade from large trees can slow snow melt, spreading runoff over a longer season.