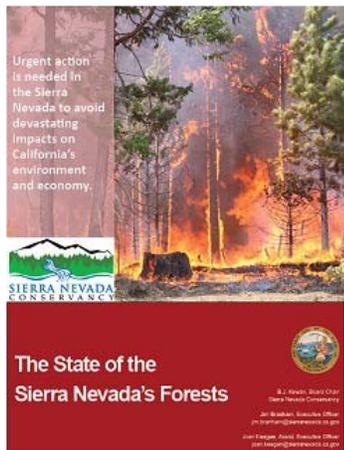


Jeff Pelline's Sierra Foothills Report

New word in our lexicon: "Megafire"

Posted on [September 23, 2014](#)



Editor's note: This should be a "call to arms" for our policy makers and residents, and the source of more local media investigations:

"It is important to understand that fire is a natural part of the Sierra ecosystem. Historically, wildfires in the Sierra were predominately low-intensity and removed excess fuel, thinned vegetation, and reduced competition for nutrients and water, resulting in healthy forests resilient against insects, disease and fire," according to a new report "[The State of the Sierra Nevada's forests](#)" by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy.

"Unfortunately, a century of fire suppression and conflict over forest management has altered much of the landscape. As a result, **wildfires in California have become larger and more extreme over the last two**

decades and many predict that this trend will continue to increase unless the pace and scale of forest restoration dramatically increases. Simply put, there is too much fuel in many of today's forests for them to burn in a safe and ecologically beneficial manner.

"•The amount of acreage burned is increasing over time. As shown in the chart below, the total acreage burned on the west slope of the Sierra has trended upward over the last century. **More acres burned in the two decades of 1990 and 2000 than any other previously recorded decade. More land has burned in the first four-and-a-half-years of this decade than seven entire decades in the past.**

"The total acreage burned on the west slope of the Sierra has trended upward over the last century – the average size of the area burned in each decade has risen by almost 300,000 acres from 1910 to today.

"•The number of large fires is also increasing: **the average number of 900+ acre fires each year in the Sierra Nevada area has grown from three to seven since 1956.** In 2013, the Sierra Nevada experienced its largest fire in recorded history – the Rim Fire at more than 257,000 acres.



"•**Between 1984 and 2010, there was a significant increase in the number of acres within a forest fire burning at high-intensity, from an average of 20% in mid-1980's to over 30% by 2010, 7 8 and the trend is continuing upward.** The Rim Fire burned at nearly 40% high-intensity.

"•The shrub regeneration that occurs after a high-intensity fire leads to forest conditions which are likely to burn again at high-intensity.

"The increase in size and severity of fires in the Sierra has added a new word to our lexicon:

megafire. Megafires, like the Rim Fire, are expensive both economically as well as ecologically. Some of the direct impacts of the Rim Fire included:

“•\$127 million for fire suppression.

“•Greenhouse gas emissions equal to the annual emissions of 2.3 million vehicles.

“•3/4 of the area’s known great gray owl nests, and 1/4 of the areas where spotted owls and goshawks roost and nest, were destroyed.

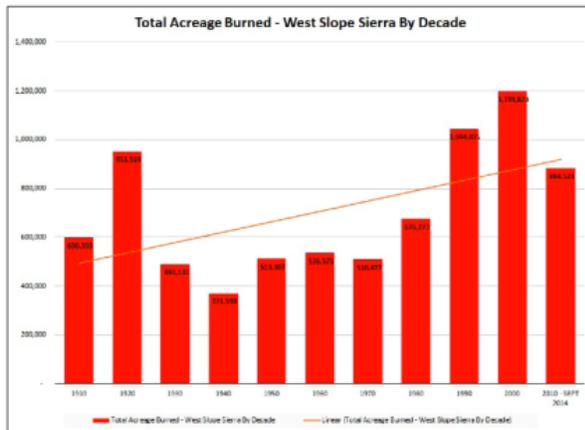
“•\$8.5 million for emergency road, trail, and watershed stabilization efforts.

“•\$35 million for the San Francisco Public Utility Commission to buy alternative energy due to damage to hydroelectric powerhouses and for repairs to its grid.

“•Millions in losses to the ranching community as a result of destruction of grazing lands, killed livestock, and damaged infrastructure.

“•An estimated \$2.75 million loss in revenue from visitor lodging in Tuolumne County.

“The effects of climate change will only make matters worse. As increasing temperatures bring about drier conditions, the result will be longer fire seasons and increased risk of pest and disease infestation in the forests. The more we improve the health of our forests, the better able they will be to withstand these impacts.”



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About jeffpelling

Jeff Pelling is a veteran editor and award-winning journalist - in print and online. He is publisher of Sierra FoodWineArt magazine and its website SierraCulture.com. Jeff covered business and technology for The San Francisco Chronicle for years, was a founding editor and Editor of CNET News, and was Editor of The Union, a 145-year-old newspaper in Grass Valley. Jeff has a bachelor's degree from UC Berkeley and a master's from Northwestern University. His hobbies include sailing and trout fishing.

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