

# Auburn Journal

## Another View: American Fire sparks up the need for better forest management

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The American Fire about 25 miles east of Auburn (as the smoke flies) is evidence once again of how connected we are to the forests and the poor condition they are in. Asthma attacks are up, and health warnings have been issued. We've had to stay indoors for a week now, and it could be several more weeks before this fire is out.

Because of the severe overgrowth, today's fires burn much hotter and leave scorched earth behind for years before regrowth can occur. This means there is more bad news coming with the winter rains. This fire is burning in the upper watershed of the North Fork of the Middle Fork of the American River. This particular fork sidesteps Oxbow Reservoir, so all that ash and sediment will be coming down the canyon, unimpeded, to the confluence and into Folsom Lake.

We didn't used to have this problem. According to the California Board of Forestry, five of the worst fires in the state's history have occurred since the turn of the century.

Placer County and Tahoe National Forest are not alone in facing these conditions. In Colorado this spring, more than 500 homes were destroyed in just one fire. Nine hundred homes were recently evacuated in Mariposa County due to the Carstens Fire, an indication of the immediate impact to humans. It cost \$12 million to put down the dangerous Robbers Fire a year ago. Colfax and Foresthill were threatened and evacuations were ordered.

How did we get here? Decades of aggressive fire suppression and conflict over forest management have led to many of our forests to become overgrown. The result, when conditions are wrong, is that large, intense fires that can cause severe damage to the landscape. These fires threaten our communities, destroy habitat, release pollutants into the air and create massive erosion.

To address this situation, the Regional Forester for the U.S. Forest Service has stated that we need to more than double the pace and scale of our forest management for many years if we are to restore the forests to ecological health. In order to achieve this objective, all of us at the local, state and federal levels need to work together to address barriers and identify opportunities.

Organizations, such as the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency based here in Auburn, are working to clear the path for this to happen by convening groups with diverse representation membership to find common ground so that work can begin. The Conservancy's efforts are paying

off. In the past five years, not one timber sale in the Sierra has been contested in court. Many forest-thinning projects, like Auburn's American River Canyon Fuel Break, have been funded in part by the conservancy.

Bioenergy plants, like those proposed by Placer County, are key components of forest restoration. Burning forest "slash" in a cleaner facility that can also provide energy makes all the sense in the world. These are small facilities, and they are needed in many Sierra communities. As a Placer County supervisor, I am working to help facilitate a community-based discussion in Foresthill, with the assistance of the conservancy, to identify the potential for a privately funded biomass facility in that area. They are good for the forest and good for the local economy.

Some members of the California Legislature recently toured some restoration projects with the Sierra Nevada Conservancy and came away impressed with both the enormity of the problems, as well as the work being done. They realize now that those of us who live near the forests have been doing the heavy lifting for those downstream. So any discussion of state funding to improve water yield from our forests should include investment here in our Sierra forests and communities.

We cannot save the spotted owl or other important endangered species if we let our forests burn up. We cannot hope to maintain our water supply or forest ecosystems without action. There is so much work we can do right now — work everyone can agree on — to make our communities safer, return the forests to ecological health, and put people back to work.

We can save millions in taxpayer dollars by investing in sound forest management practices for a fraction of the cost of fire suppression, sediment removal projects or building new dams. And the time is obviously now, as we are reminded with every breath we take.

Jennifer Montgomery is the Placer County Supervisor for District 5, which includes the communities of Auburn and Foresthill.

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