

# FOREST INDUSTRIES OF AMADOR, CALAVERAS GETTING \$16 MILLION BOOST

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SAN ANDREAS - Economically depressed Amador and Calaveras counties are about to receive millions of dollars in forest-restoration funding from the federal government.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack announced Thursday a 10-year commitment of up to \$16 million to revive the health of forest-related industries on national forest lands in the two counties.

The Cornerstone Project in the headwaters of the Mokelumne, Calaveras, Stanislaus and Cosumnes rivers will receive \$730,000 this year.

Funding means that federal officials have recognized that the region is at the forefront of a nationwide movement to restore forests, said Calaveras County Supervisor Steve Wilensky.

"This is a huge game changer in our forest. It will increase the scope and scale of work. It will allow us to put our workforce back to work in the forest," Wilensky said.

Over the past seven years, Wilensky has collaborated with loggers, job-training agencies, environmentalists, property owners and federal and state agencies to overcome a variety of problems, including overgrown, fire-prone forests and the widespread joblessness caused by the closure of most lumber mills in the Mother Lode.

The Cornerstone Project is one of 10 new forest restoration projects across the United States that Vilsack announced Thursday. Only one other - in the Lassen National Forest east of Redding - was in California.

Catastrophic wildfire has been a particular concern of forest managers in recent years. Decades of fire suppression and plantation-style tree planting has led to dense forests with lots of undergrowth that are vulnerable to high-intensity fires.

In contrast, before the Gold Rush, forests in the Sierra Nevada generally had frequent, low-intensity fires that resulted in a landscape with fewer but much larger trees and open meadows below the trees.

In addition to the new funding for the federal Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, officials with the Stanislaus and Eldorado national forests were already planning to spend about \$21 million on forest thinning and restoration over the next decade.

Combined, the two funding sources mean that more than 38,000 acres of forest will receive thinning or other treatment. In addition, the project will open the forest to new commercial enterprises, including increased harvesting of small-diameter trees for milling, and businesses that create products such as animal bedding, fence posts, fuel pellets, and compost.

"There will be a product yard in Wilseyville that will be handling green waste," Wilensky said.

Over the past seven years, several groups laid the groundwork to make it possible for such substantial federal funding.

The Calaveras Healthy Impact Product Solutions Project began training forestry workers and securing fire-safety grants to do thinning work. Later, the Amador Calaveras Consensus Group brought loggers, environmentalists, land owners and others together to resolve differences that could have blocked progress.

As a result, recently trained crews are already sending small-diameter logs to the recently-retooled Sierra Pacific Industries mill near Sonora, and sending chipped fuel to a biomass electrical generation plant near Lone.

Wilensky said that the National Forest lands are only the start. Hundreds of thousands of acres are also managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management or private owners. He said the initiative is important not just to the health of forests, but also to the communities that will have new economic opportunities.

"All of these plans that we have been making had to be supported by opening new opportunities on federal lands around here. And this is the engine that will drive that. We are not done yet."

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