

Edson sees county in forefront of drought relief strategy

Proposal would increase water yield, provide jobs, reduce forest fires

By Nick Baptista

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While Calaveras County likely will never be headquarters for a corporate giant such as Apple or General Electric, District 1 Supervisor Cliff Edson is pursuing plans to introduce a new industry that could provide jobs and income for generations.

The new industry relies on some of the area's natural resources, namely its land, forests and the water received in the form of rainfall and snowpack.

Edson calls it watershed management and he's pushing for the county to receive funding from the state, federal government and urban water agencies to launch a three-year pilot program to prove that scientific-based, land-use management techniques could be implemented that would increase water yields by maybe as much as 20 percent.

"The state should like something that," he said [sic].

Owners of forest and range lands would be rewarded monetarily for managing their property to increase water yield, he added, and new jobs would be created in the process.

Those new jobs would be in forestry and power production as forests are thinned along scientific and environmental guidelines to increase the snowpack and the wood waste from the thinning process could be shipped to cogeneration plants to produce electricity, he said.

Watershed management strives to produce a greater, but slower and longer lasting runoff, and less evaporation of the snowpack, he explained.

Edson foresees a boon of contractors who would help landowners manage their property to increase water yield and water agencies entering the picture by passing a portion of their rates to those participating in the program.

The state's drought makes it clear even a small gain in water yield would be helpful to those water agencies, Edson said, and they should be willing for [sic] pay for the additional water.

Another benefit of the program is reducing the risk of catastrophic fires in the forests that have been thinned.

The three-year pilot program would document the benefits of following the policy and could serve as a model for other watersheds in the state, he said.

The supervisor wants to collaborate with government, environmentalists, landowners, water agencies, forest managers and other stakeholders to implement the program.

In the forests, studies indicate that thinning to allow openings on the forest floor permits snow to pile up deeper and increase water yield, Edson said, while on the rangeland, particular grasses reduce runoff and allow a greater percentage of precipitation to enter into the natural underground water storage system.

Clear cutting in the forest is not helpful to water yield because such openings on the forest floor are too large with greater exposure to the sun that causes the water to run off too quickly, he added.

“It would be nice to see Calaveras County as a pioneer in this field and it could lead to many well-paying jobs for generations,” he said.