

SUMMIT LOOKS AT FORESTS, WATER SUPPLY

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VIEW VIDEO 

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SAN ANDREAS - Most of California's water comes from forests, and poorly maintained forests provide less water, either because they burn down or because they are too dense and suck most of the water into plants and trees.

Now, with a drought on and in the months after the Rim Fire devastated 400 square miles of forest in Tuolumne County, lots of folks who manage forests and water districts are eager to address the problem and work to take better care of forests.

But it won't be easy, if a meeting held Thursday in San Andreas is any indication.

"Nobody wants to continue the direction we're going," said Mitch Dion, general manager of the Calaveras County Water District, which took the lead in convening the water summit.

The "way we're going" is the historic decline in forest health and other changes that make Rim Fire-scale disasters more likely, including in the Mokelumne, Calaveras and Stanislaus river watersheds that provide water to this region.

The 12 people meeting around a table in the San Andreas Town Hall included scientists, foresters, private logging representatives and environmentalists.

Calaveras County Water District board of directors member Jeff Davidson welcomed them and asked participants, including the 50 or so people in the audience, to "leave your political opinions to yourself."

Initially, that seemed to happen, as one participant after another said he or she agrees that somehow, there has to be a whole lot more work done to thin forests, both to reduce fire danger and to increase water yield.

That consensus was interrupted, in contrast, when the ranking person present, Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Granite Bay, arrived and said he believes water policy is in the grip of "radical environmentalists" who will not allow the construction of dams that could dramatically increase water supply.

McClintock said he will be coming forward with a legislative package intended to speed the construction of new dams, including small dams at the highest altitudes in the Sierra

Nevada. McClintock said he hopes to restore the dam approval process that was used when San Francisco built its Hetch Hetchy water supply system in Yosemite National Park.

No one at the meeting said much about McClintock's comments during the session. Afterward, John Buckley of the Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center said, "The congressman couldn't have done anything worse to be offensive and in people's faces."

Buckley was in the audience during the discussion but was not one of those at the table trying to figure out whether a demonstration project could be conducted to improve forest health and water yield in Calaveras County.

The key participants at the table seemed to agree that much thinning and management needs to be done, whether they were University of California scientists, an executive with Sierra Pacific Industries or federal foresters.

Roger Bales, a professor of engineering and director of the Sierra Nevada Research Institute at the University of California, Merced, may have made one of the key observations when he said, "A lot of the California water system, we operate by the seat of our pants."

What he meant was that measurements in many cases haven't been done that could reveal how much water comes from which forests and how much that yield might improve with better forestry practices.

At the end of the day, the only real consensus was that everyone at the table could support more research by Bales and his colleagues. They didn't find any project that everyone could support immediately to reduce the hazard to Calaveras forests.

Dion, the local water district manager, tried to put a positive spin on it, saying he still hopes for eventual efforts to improve forests.

"We think we can bring some federal money to bear," Dion said, noting that it might be possible to use efforts by research scientists to speed the environmental review required to get approval for thinning projects in federal forests.

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