

COSTLY LESSON OF RIM FIRE: FORESTS NEED TO BE THINNED

BUT POLITICS, FUNDING OFTEN GET IN WAY OF PREVENTATIVE MEASURES, EXPERTS SAY

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SAN ANDREAS - If you burn it, they will come.

That movie-based logic is how federal dollars get allocated for forests, say foresters, scientists, environmentalists and others familiar with how fire risk gets handled in the Sierra.

The Rim Fire that started Aug. 17 and burned more than 400 square miles has already run up a \$127 million price tag for firefighting. On Friday, federal officials announced another \$4.3 million in funding for post-fire treatments to damaged watersheds.

But cost-effective efforts that might prevent such catastrophic fires languish due to lack of funding and political will, observers say, even though thinning forests using controlled fires to reduce the fuel load would, in the long run, save taxpayers millions.

"Would you rather spend \$130 million fighting pretty unsuccessfully a wildfire, or would you prefer to have those dollars spent proactively reducing any potential for such a massive fire?" asked John Buckley, executive director of Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch. "Taxpayers would prefer to have far less smoke, a healthier tourist-friendly forest and abundant habitat for wildlife."

The kind of devastation the Rim Fire caused is exactly what the Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group has been trying to prevent on the Mokelumne River watersheds that supply water through San Joaquin County to the East Bay.

The Consensus Group is an alliance that includes federal forest officials, loggers, business people, American Indians and environmentalists. By settling their differences, they've been able over the past four years to speed the planning and execution of projects that thin forests, feed biomass to power plants, and get people back to work restoring meadows and protecting watersheds.

Despite the thousands of acres of work done, leaders in the group admit they need to be doing tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of acres more.

"We are not getting enough resources. That's the bottom line," said Cathy Koos Breazeal, executive director of the Amador Fire Safe Council and a member of the Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group.

Malcolm North, a U.S. Forest Service research scientist, was the lead author of a paper published a year ago in the Journal of Forestry that called for massive expansion of the use of controlled fires to reduce fuel loads in the Sierra.

North's report found that less than 20 percent of the Sierra landscape that needs it is receiving fuel treatments.

"The current pattern and scale of fuels reduction is unlikely to ever significantly advance restoration efforts," he wrote.

Jim Carroll, a career California Department of Forestry firefighter and the chief of West Point Fire Protection District, has seen the problem first hand. Early in his career, he worked on the 1987 Stanislaus Complex Fire, which burned some of the same areas that the Rim Fire scorched this year. He's been fighting the Rim Fire off and on the past two months.

"I look back a quarter of a century later and it is inevitable. If you can't do anything to mitigate unstopped fuel growth, you are just going to do this over and over and over," Carroll said.

Not that forest managers haven't tried. Thousands of acres saw mechanical thinning and logging to reduce fuel loads in the past few years inside the Rim Fire perimeter. The problem, observers say, was that it wasn't enough, and in many cases forest crews never followed up with controlled burns needed to reduce slash piles and eliminate ground vegetation.

"On the Forest Service portion, 16,000 acres of prescribed burning were approved, fully approved, but they sat there not getting burned year after year...", Buckley said. "And most of those 16,000 acres were within the Rim Fire when it got burned this year."

Buckley said a variety of factors, including hang-ups in funding from Congress and bad luck having the right weather conditions, led to the delay of the controlled burns.

Federal and state forest officials, conservationists, logging industry representatives and others were scheduled to discuss lessons from the Rim Fire during a meeting today of the Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group. That meeting was canceled, however, because the federal government shutdown made it unlikely that federal members of the group would be present, Breazeal said.

Breazeal said the current situation in Washington and long-term federal budget trends mean hope is waning that Congress will adequately fund forest restoration.

One hope on the horizon: that agencies serving water consumers in cities may eventually decide it is worth paying to protect their drinking supply. Such arrangements have already happened in places in Colorado and New Mexico where devastating fires damaged watersheds, reducing water volume or impairing its quality.

Until winter rains hit, it won't be clear how much damage the Rim Fire did to the water supply for San Francisco, which comes from Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in Yosemite National Park.

Andrea Pook, a spokeswoman for the East Bay Municipal Water District, said even before the Rim Fire her agency was cooperating with other government and nonprofit entities to study what cost-effective measures EBMUD could take to protect its water supply on the Mokelumne River. The upper Mokelumne watershed lies within the forest area whose restoration is being facilitated by the Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group.

Like others interviewed for this story, Craig Thomas, conservation director for Sierra Forest Legacy, said such conversations are a sign of progress on the cultural and scientific levels.

But he acknowledged new awareness of the need to better manage forests has not yet translated into adequate, wide-scale forestry practice. Which means additional Rim Fires are not just likely, but inevitable.

"We are going to pay some really, really heavy dues for the decisions we made before we adopted that more enlightened culture," Thomas said.

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