FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE

BURNING OFF, THINNING FOREST FUEL NOW COULD SAVE MILLIONS

Phil Bowden, regional fuels program manager for the U.S. Forest Service, looks at the stump of a centuries-old tree that died in the 2004 Rim Fire and was removed during salvage logging. A new study found spending $68 million now to thin forests in the Upper Mokelumne River Watershed could save millions more over the next 30 years. Dana M. Nichols/THE RECORD

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SAN ANDREAS - Kim Carr wants to save you a lot of money. And by that she means more than $200 million.

"Really, in this watershed, the taxpayers are the ones who pay," Carr said Tuesday as she looked at snags still standing in the Mokelumne River Canyon almost a decade after the 2004 Power Fire charred more than 13,000 acres.

Taxpayers pay when fires rage hot because the canyon is mostly National Forest land. Just the initial fight to suppress the Power Fire cost almost $5 million.

And larger fires, if and when they happen, would cost even more. Last summer's Rim Fire two counties to the south in the Stanislaus National Forest, for example, burned more than 250,000 acres and cost more than $125 million to extinguish.

A study released this month found that much of such costs in the Mokelumne watershed could be avoided if forests were properly managed.

That study was a joint product of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a California state agency where Carr is sustainable initiatives coordinator, the U.S. Forest Service and The Nature Conservancy.

It found that spending $68 million now to thin fuels on 100,000 acres in the Mokelumne River watershed would save between $124 million and $226 million over the next 30 years.

The problem is getting the money up front. As firefighting costs have jumped in recent years, federal officials have paid for it in part by dipping into forest-thinning budgets.

Less thinning means forests are denser and burn hotter when they ignite, pushing up firefighting costs further, and creating a vicious cycle.

"We need a more sustainable economic model to fund the work," Carr said.

Carr is doing her part. She was in Washington, D.C., a few weeks ago explaining the report to officials there. But she is also trying to "identify new potential investors that are impacted by wildfire."

The cost/benefit study, for example, didn't even consider the value of water that comes from the Mokelumne Watershed. A catastrophic fire here could send sediment into reservoirs and permanently reduce the amount of water from a river that provides water to more than a million people in the Bay Area.

Carr said she met last week with members of the East Bay Municipal Utility District Board of Directors to "start a conversation" about whether the district's ratepayers should pay a small amount of money now to assure their water supply in the future.

Carr and others involved in the study say the lessons learned here apply to other forests around the state too.

San Francisco, for example, is already facing more than $36 million in repair costs for infrastructure damaged in last summer's Rim Fire. The Rim Fire burned areas next to Hetch Hetchy, a major source of San Francisco's drinking water as well as electrical power for its municipal trains and electric buses.

Statewide in California, about 255,000 acres of national forest need to be thinned each year in order to keep forests in good health and reduce fire risk, Carr said.

Unfortunately, only about 60,000 acres per year of thinning is getting done.

If funding is found to maintain the Mokelumne Watershed's forests, then Eldorado National Forest Amador Ranger District Fuels Officer Robyn Woods will lead the fight.

One of the enemies Woods must combat is what she calls "the walking dead."

That's a term foresters use for the charred trunks and branches of dead trees that stand for years after a major fire. As the snags age, they become increasingly dangerous and make it impossible for crews to safely work nearby on restoration projects.

"Last summer, we lost a smoke jumper because a limb came down," Woods said.

That was in the Modoc National Forest. But the Power Fire area in the Mokelumne Canyon also has many snags, in part because litigation prevented some of the snags from being logged while it was still safe to do so, Woods said.

By thinning forests in the first place, it is possible to reduce fire intensity and reduce the chances that forest managers will have to struggle with managing snag-filled wastelands for years after a fire, Woods said.

"That's one of our issues in treating this area right now is the standing dead," Woods said Tuesday.

Phil Bowden, regional fuels manager for the U.S. Forest Service, says the study's estimates on the savings that come from proper forest management are very conservative. The study, for example, looked only at the kind of fires that have typically happened in the area in the past 20 years. Then, based on data about the behavior of real fires, it predicted how much smaller and less intense those fires would be if forests were thinned before the fire started.

The model did not consider an event such as last year's Rim Fire, and the model did not account for climate change, which scientists say is causing greater volatility and the threat of periodic droughts.

Large fires and climate change mean that losses from fires will likely worsen with time, which means the benefit of preventive thinning will be greater, Bowden said.

"We are going into uncharted territory in the future," Bowden said.

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To see the full Mokelumne Watershed Avoided Cost Analysis, go to www.sierranevadaconservancy.ca.gov.

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