

Take a Lode Off: Will management plan mean money?

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Supervisor Cliff Edson has proposed “A Comprehensive Watershed Program for Calaveras County,” which he envisions becoming a model for replication throughout the Sierra Nevada. Edson believes that our forests and rangeland are currently undermanaged and that enhanced management can increase water yield and that an associated benefit will be a reduction in wildfires.

And he believes that if we can increase our water yield, the downstream beneficiaries should be willing to pay for it, thus, a major component of his plan is payment for ecosystem services (PES).

As explained in Developing Payment for Ecosystem Services Programs in California’s Central Valley, “Payments for Ecosystem Services programs are built on the recognition that ecosystems provide valuable and measurable services to people. Put simply, ecosystem services are the range of benefits people obtain from the environment, including vibrant wildlife and fish habitats, fresh water, healthy soil and clean air.”

Hence, PES programs are intended to pay willing landowners to protect and enhance the public benefits their lands supply. The most common PES program to date is the conservation easement. A conservation easement is, essentially, a voluntary agreement between a landowner and the easement holder, such as a land trust or government agency, which restricts the type or amount of development that may take place on land in order to protect some type of natural capital.

In return for granting an easement, the landowner gets cash or, in the case of donated easements, a tax deduction. In addition, there is usually a property tax break, because a conservation easement means decreased market value for the land. However, the perpetual nature of conservation easements makes some landowners uncomfortable.

There is an effort underway to develop PES programs based upon a model such as the Williamson Act, which protects agricultural land under self-renewing 10-year contracts in exchange for reduced property taxes. The difference would be that enrolling in a 10-year PES program would include cash payments in exchange for enhanced management of private property for the perpetuation and, perhaps, increase of a designated ecosystem service or services.

Edson’s proposal seeks payment from downstream water users such as the East Bay Municipal Utility District and the Stockton East Water District for enhanced management of our three Calaveras County watersheds, the Mokelumne, the Calaveras, and the Stanislaus. Such management would, theoretically, increase water yield and reduce the risk of wildfires because it involves thinning trees and reducing understory growth.

The idea is that the beneficiaries of the increased water yield, i.e., the ecosystem service, should be willing to pay for it. Such payment would provide the incentive for local private landowners to participate in the project. Edson also anticipates the creation of jobs associated with a watershed management industry that might include education, oversight and implementation programs.

On Oct. 28, the Board of Supervisors voted to approve a Caltrans Strategic Planning Grant application to initiate Edson's proposal. I was impressed with the number of times Supervisor Edson used the word "sustainable" in his presentation, because it has become impossible to talk about anything sustainable at a Board of Supervisors meeting without conjuring the specter of Agenda 21, the United Nations' non-binding resolution to advance sustainable development in the 21st century, which some locals consider a conspiracy to redistribute the world's wealth.

Sometimes sustainable just means that something is capable of being beneficially maintained over time. Still, it was gratifying that both environmentalists and property rights advocates found things to praise in Edson's proposal, which is complex and ambitious and will certainly require a collaborative response from stakeholders all along the political and social spectrum in order to be successful. As ever, the devil will be in the details, and especially in the scientific details of watershed management.

Conceptually, I like the supervisor's proposal, because it seeks to stimulate the local economy and create jobs by utilizing our natural assets. Enhanced watershed management presupposes the preservation of the watersheds as open space, which will have the effect of preserving our rural character and beauty, which, in turn, helps our tourism-based businesses. Edson's proposal also helps agriculture, because ranchers and foresters will have saleable commodities associated with their land in the form of ecosystem services.

My recommendation to Supervisor Edson is to increase the scope of the ecosystem services he seeks to commodify, because it will likely increase the potential funding sources for his project and avoid the pitfalls of managing the landscape for a single resource, namely, water. Carbon sequestration immediately comes to mind.

An experiment in Marin County conducted over the past several years indicates that simply spreading compost on rangeland will remove vast amounts of carbon dioxide from the air. As the San Francisco Chronicle reported, even Republicans "like the idea that 'carbon farming' could mean profits for ranchers." In Calaveras, we'll see who ends up liking what, but I wish Supervisor Edson luck.

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http://www.calaverasenterprise.com/opinion/article_7c85d5f8-6930-11e4-953c-3b4f9a655d63.html