

# ‘Urgency’ key to saving Sierra Nevada forests

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SACRAMENTO — Leaders of more than 100 state, federal and nonprofit agencies that touch on the Sierra Nevada watershed gathered Wednesday for what all described as an urgent call for collaboration borne of catastrophes like the Rim and King fires, climate change and the drought.

“We pretty much know every patch of the Sierra Nevada’s going to burn,” said Hugh Safford of the U.S. Forest Service, addressing the group hosted by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. “What we need to know is how and when it’s going to burn.”

Safford said a strategic plan to address forest management must cross agency and political lines in order to leverage enough money to do the work and to ramp up the scale of whatever solution is used.

Those solutions, which could include controlled burning, ecological improvement using beavers or financing the “upstream” property owners so they make improvements to benefit the “downstream” residents, must be put in place quickly, without bureaucratic impediments.

Participants agreed.

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“Typically we function in silos,” said Bernie Gyant of the U.S. Forest Service. “We need to lay out an all-lands approach and focus our attention on the watershed.

“Today is the start of that process,” Gyant added. “If we erase all boundaries, it will make the difference — the ‘no action’ alternative is not working for us.”

Gyant said the watershed improvement plan must include economic, ecological and social factors, as well as controlled burns.

“We need to include things like addressing invasive species and abandoned mines for watershed ecological improvement,” he said.

Gyant was part of a 25-person panel discussion that also included Nevada County Supervisor Nate Beason.

Beason, who is also on the board of the Rural Counties Representatives of California, said he believes that “responsible” forest management includes leveraging state and federal monies within the private sector. Otherwise, there will not be enough of a team effort to get the work done.

“Even if we pushed the button today (on a watershed improvement plan), do we have enough capacity to manage it?” Beason said. “The answer is ‘No’ — the Rim Fire salvage effort proves that.”

Beason told the group that Nevada County would have a hard time finding someone to invest \$50 million to \$60 million to fund operation of a sawmill when supplies are so uncertain. He gave details of the county’s vegetation ordinances and said he would like to do even more to mandate that private property owners create fuel breaks to separate improved properties from unimproved properties.

“What gets lost in the argument is that everyone, not just the rural areas, has a stake in this in terms of supplies of timber, water and food,” Beason said. “We’ve got to understand that what happens in the forest doesn’t stay in the forest.”

Chuck Bonham, director of the California Department of Fish & Wildlife, said he takes the goals of the California Water Action Plan seriously. He said the California Water Bond, or Proposition 1, approved by voters in November will offer financing for programs such as restoring a minimum of 10,000 acres of mountain meadows and addressing headwaters and habitat restoration.

“There’s an urgency for restoration,” Bonham said.

He said there will be about \$285 million in competitive grants available.

Ashley Conrad-Saydan, secretary for climate policy for the California Environmental Protection Agency, said the state is entering a national contest with a \$1 billion grand prize on the best way to deal with natural disaster responses, using the Rim Fire response in its application.

“The question is how do you implement a holistic plan in an area that’s already burned, and then implement it in other places that have not yet burned?” Conrad-Saydan said.

The deadline on the application is March 27, she said.

John Buckley of the Central Sierra Research Center said the regulatory impediments — including environmental rules — must be streamlined.

“The (environmental regulatory) process is cumbersome,” he said. “It will be two years after the Rim Fire until the decision is made where to replant.”

The other problem, Buckley said, was the lack of sufficient markets for biomass, the woody waste product left over by forest fuels reduction.

David Edelson of the Nature Conservancy said in addition to ramping up scale on any forest thinning or controlled burning, the group should explore “beavers instead of bulldozers” to help restore mountain meadows and recharge the water table. He said beavers were being used in other states with success.

Bonham said he was meeting with several groups advocating the use of beavers in forest restoration.

Jim Branham of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy said he didn’t want to wait for the next disaster to take action.

“Catastrophe may be necessary to push us to change,” Branham said. “If the Rim and the King fires aren’t catastrophes, I don’t know what is.”

NOTE: This story was updated on Friday, March 6, 2015, to clarify remarks by Nevada County Supervisor Nate Beason about timber supplies and fuel breaks.