

Manage forests to reduce wildfire risks

Another View

By **Jim Holmes and Jennifer Montgomery**



File
Jennifer Montgomery



It's become an annual California phenomenon. Summer transitions to fall and our forests burn.

Fire suppression in the past century has been so successful that forests which before would have been naturally thinned now are choked with fuels ready to explode when ignited.

These catastrophic wildfires create two significant negative effects – they release huge amounts of harmful pollutants into the air and destroy trees that help to reduce greenhouse gas accumulation in the atmosphere. Soil nutrients, sensitive watersheds and critical wildlife habitat also are destroyed.

The good news is that something can be done to reduce the occurrence and devastating effects of forest wildfires.

Strategically planned and effectively implemented forest management, including thinning and prescribed burning, are needed to restore California forests to a more natural fire-resistant state.

Thinning has been shown in practice and research to reduce the size and intensity of wildfires by widening tree spacing and removing smaller trees and brush, which serve as ladder fuels that move low-intensity ground fires into the tree tops to become raging crown fires.

Thinning operations also produce conventional wood products and biomass “slash” – limbs, tops and smaller trees that have little market value. Some dead trees and other biomass are left for wildlife habitat and to build soil nutrients, but the excess simply contributes to increased fire hazard. Rather than burning or chipping it in the forest – typical current practices – this excess biomass can be transported to cogeneration facilities where it is burned efficiently to produce electricity.

These operations return unhealthy forests to conditions more like those which existed a century or more ago. This reduces the number of catastrophic wildfires, increases the growth and carbon-storage capability of remaining trees, generates renewable electrical energy that offsets fossil fuel use, and provides wood-based building materials that displace the need for energy-intensive cement and steel.

And at a time when so many rural areas have been economically devastated, these operations can help communities whose residents have historically relied on forest-management operations for their livelihood.

Unfortunately, insufficient funding is available for widespread implementation of responsible forest-thinning programs.

One potential solution being explored in Placer County, home to some of California's most beautiful and valuable forests, is the use of monetary credits from a local carbon market to help pay for strategic forest-management programs that would include thinning, transporting chipped biomass to energy-generation facilities, and reforesting bare or under-stocked forest areas.

It is essential for these activities to be reflected in carbon-accounting processes being developed for the implementation of AB 32, California's Global Warming Solutions Act signed by Governor Schwarzenegger in 2006. This will ensure that carbon reductions from such forest-management programs are in addition to business-as-usual conditions and the full range of potential impacts is accurately tracked.

The Placer initiative also will involve analysis of additional benefits resulting from effective forest management, including protection and enhancement of water resources and wildlife habitat.

We hope to facilitate implementation of forest-management programs that will help reduce the risks and consequences of wildfires and at the same time ensure the sustainability of our cherished forests.

We see it as a situation where the forests, wildlife and residents all benefit, and we look forward to a future when fire season is met with a much lower level of anxiety.

Jim Holmes is a Placer County Supervisor representing District 3, including the City of Auburn, and member of the Placer County Air Pollution Control District Board of Directors; Jennifer Montgomery is a Placer County Supervisor representing District 5, including Lake Tahoe's North Shore. Both are members of the Placer County Wildfire Protection and Biomass Policy Team.