

Viewpoints: Proactive forestry offers series of tangible benefits

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Once again the United States seems headed for a record wildfire year. The wildfire season is just beginning in California, and the Robbers fire in Placer County is unfortunately a harbinger of things to come.

Wildfires affecting California's forests have been increasing steadily in size and severity for the past decade. Unless our approach changes, that trend will continue.

Annual forest growth here far exceeds the amount of material removed through management practices such as thinning. Coupled with the fire-suppression strategies necessary to protect people, resources and structures, the resulting massive buildup of woody biomass makes our forests unnaturally dense and prone to high intensity wildfire.

According to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, there are more than 60 forest fires currently burning across the state. They're harmful to public health, public assets and the economy, and incredibly expensive to fight.

Wildfires release large amounts of harmful pollutants into the air and damage important water, wildlife habitat and recreation resources. They also kill trees that sequester greenhouse gases and are a source of renewable wood products.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

The Placer Air Pollution Control District envisions a shift away from our current reactive approach toward proactive and more cost-effective strategies aimed at reducing wildfire risk and impacts.

As part of this effort we're sponsoring research to determine how proactive forest management practices affect wildfire air pollution levels. This work is confirming that forest thinning reduces air pollutants released during wildfire events. It also

shows that using excess forest biomass as fuel for energy production rather than burning it in open piles, the typical current practice, also improves air quality while helping reduce fossil-fuels dependency and providing employment in rural counties.

In some situations forest thinning produces enough commercial product to pay for the removal of excess brush and small trees. In other cases, especially on small private landholdings, there is a net cost of as much as \$1,200 per acre to do the work. But considering the typical cost of wildfire suppression – the Robbers fire cost more than \$13 million to fight, or about \$5,000 per acre – plus the cost of restoration, lost value of damaged forests resources and lost potential employment in forest-dependent communities, we think most would agree that the upfront treatment cost is reasonable.

Unfortunately, federal and state budget challenges are limiting public funding for forest thinning and restoration activities.

One potential solution we've explored is the use of monetary credits from a local carbon market to help pay for strategic forest management programs involving thinning and using the biomass material to produce renewable energy.

Another promising solution is to use forest biomass material as a fuel for renewable energy production under the state's renewable energy policies.

Currently California has about 30 operating commercial-scale biomass power plants, but many were built in the 1980s and are reaching the end of their useful service life. Strategically locating smaller community-scale forest biomass power facilities in areas at risk of wildfire will provide a ready market for the excess forest biomass removed during forest fuels reduction and restoration activities.

The California Public Utilities Commission is currently developing a feed-in tariff, or FiT, program to help support implementation of small-scale renewable energy projects. The FiT program establishes an energy pricing mechanism that allows project developers to secure long-term power sales contracts with large utilities.

These contracts are of key importance to the implementation of new forest biomass power projects. The energy pricing should reflect the tangible benefits that community-scale forest biomass projects deliver, including reduction of catastrophic wildfire risk, improved air quality, reduced fire suppression costs, watershed

improvement, protection of existing power transmission and distribution assets and stabilization of rates.

We're excited about the potential of this program to spur the development of more community-scale biomass projects, and pleased that CPUC President Michael Peevey has asked his staff and fellow commissioners to find ways through this process to increase renewable energy production and public safety.

Benefits of the proactive forest-management practices we're demonstrating to be effective are clear: cleaner air, healthier forests, reduced health risks, economic opportunity and more renewable energy. The sooner we're able to expand their implementation, the better for all of us and the environment.

Tom Christofk is the air pollution control officer for the Placer County Air Pollution Control District.