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Yosemite fire lesson: Cut risk with biomass energy

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The Rim Fire is a sad reminder that wildfires are a growing threat to public health, safety and the water and power supplies for large parts of California. California can significantly reduce those risks by investing in small, sustainable forest biomass facilities that would use green waste to create renewable energy.

California has passed legislation (Senate Bill 1122, authored by former state Sen. Michael Rubio from Kern County) to accelerate bioenergy development from forestry and other organic waste sources, and it is now up to the Public Utilities Commission to adopt rules that will get facilities built in time to prevent more Rim Fires. These facilities use the forest biomass (brush, branches, small trees, bark collected to reduce fire risks) as the fuel to generate electricity in small power plants.



Wildfire is a natural part of California's ecosystem, but wildfires are increasing dramatically in frequency and severity as the result of climate change and overgrown forests. Seven of the 10 worst fires on record in California have occurred since 2000, and the Rim Fire is one of the worst yet. In recent years, wildfires in California have affected an average of more than 900,000 acres per year and cost taxpayers \$1.2 billion annually in fire suppression and forest restoration efforts.

The effects of these wildfires are devastating. They threaten lives, homes and businesses. They also have enormous impacts on public health from the smoke, soot and other emissions. The Rim Fire has emitted approximately 30 million tons of carbon dioxide, equivalent to the annual emissions from 5 million cars. A severe fire season can emit as much carbon as the annual emissions from the state's entire transportation or energy sector.

Rather than letting California's forests go up in smoke, we can dramatically reduce the risk of wildfire and produce clean, renewable energy in its place. The 50 megawatts of forest biomass required by Rubio's bill would reduce wildfire risks on more than 300,000 acres over a 10-year period while providing renewable energy for 37,000 homes. Sized and located appropriately, these small-scale facilities would help increase forest ecosystem health and provide local jobs, energy and other benefits.



The Public Utilities Commission is now on the front lines of California's efforts to reduce catastrophic wildfires and maintain the many benefits that California's forests provide, including much of the state's water and electricity. Charged with implementing SB1122, the state public utilities commission needs to adopt rules that will get new bioenergy facilities built quickly and in the most fire-prone areas, such as Placer County near Lake Tahoe and

other communities in the Sierra. The CPUC must work with the California Department of Forests and Fire to ensure that the program is environmentally sustainable.

The Rim Fire makes very clear that doing nothing will cost ratepayers and the public far more than taking steps now to reduce the costs and impacts of catastrophic wildfires. Accelerating the development of small-scale forest biomass facilities is one of the most important steps California can take.

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