

Sierra is burning hotter; Congress must cool it off

By Marc Boyd
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Alarm bells might still be ringing in Sacramento due to the “state of emergency” declared last August by Gov. Jerry Brown as more than a dozen wildfires were blazing through California forests. Two months later, the King fire in the El Dorado National Forest became the fiery finale of one of California’s most challenging wildfire seasons.

An eye-popping 47 percent of the 98,000-acre King fire burned at “high severity.” Incredibly, 50,000 acres burned in a single day.

“High severity” is the worst category in fire-rating system, meaning that “complete fuel consumption” has occurred and 70 percent of “top-soil” vegetation has been destroyed. In the 1980s, California wildfires reached “high severity” only across 20 percent of their areas. By 2010, that was up to 30 percent.

In 2013, the largest wildfire in Sierra Nevada history – the Rim fire – burned at nearly 40 percent high severity.

In the aftermath of the Rim and King fires, science-based policies designed to address the sharp increase in the severity of Sierra Nevada wildfires are urgently needed.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy, in its 10th year as a state agency, released its “The State of the Sierra Nevada Forests” report last year. It predicted a dire future for Sierra forests if the scope and scale of critical investments are not dramatically increased. The report said that more land has been consumed by wildfires in Sierra Nevada over the past 4 1/2 years than in the previous seven decades.

The U.S. Forest Service says up to 9 million acres within its Region 5, which includes the Sierra Nevada, are in need of ecological restoration. In the 2011 report “Ecological Restoration Implementation Plan,” Region 5 officials urged Congress to begin “an environmental restoration of unprecedented scale.”

The consequences of not heeding the advice from these two government agencies will have profound negative impacts on water quality, air quality, recreational opportunities, habitat and the vitality of the Sierra Nevada economy.

California policymakers have already taken a lead role in protecting our state’s water supply by making watershed restoration a key element of the \$618 million California Water Action Plan. As part of the plan, the state’s Department of Fish and Wildlife will restore 10,000 acres in strategic forest locations. Sixty percent of California’s domestic water supply originates in California’s forests.

Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Elk Grove, represents a vast portion of the Sierra Nevada. He was recently appointed to chair the Federal Lands Subcommittee in the House of Representatives.

In August, at the 18th Lake Tahoe Summit, McClintock called for changes in how forest fires are fought. “The escalating costs of fighting fires should be treated as other natural disasters and not funded by shorting fuel reduction budgets.” In the last session of Congress, McClintock was among 140 co-sponsors of the bipartisan HR 3992 – the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2014.

It would have treated wildfires as natural disasters on par with hurricanes and floods and allowed the Forest Service to avoid tapping into funds earmarked for fuel reduction (forest thinning), which has occurred for eight of the past 10 years. Astonishingly, the rising percentage of the Forest Service budget used for wildfire management has skyrocketed from 13 percent in the early 1990s to a jaw-dropping 56 percent in 2014.

But HR 3992 did not get a single vote in a single committee and died due to objections over budget cap increases.

If our Sierra Nevada forests are to return to sustainable health, the current dire conditions require an urgent response by Congress.

It is a slippery slope to allow funds proposed for disaster relief to be subject to objections over bill-killing provisions if they exceed an arbitrary budget cap. Congress needs to pass legislation to increase funding for ecological restoration of our national forests so we can continue to count on the Sierra Nevada region as a major contributor to the economic vitality, environmental health and natural beauty of our Golden State.

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