



## Our forests need help of science

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THE massive toll catastrophic wildfire exacts on human lives and property is well documented.

Since Oct. 20, the ongoing Southern California fires have scorched nearly 500,000 acres - roughly three-fourths the size of Rhode Island, prompted the largest evacuation since the Civil War, caused 12 deaths and injured hundreds, all at a cost yet to be determined but which some think will top \$2billion.

And there are other consequences as well, including endangered wildlife dead, watersheds dramatically damaged by ash and erosion, and native plants wiped out.

But the underlying causes of these monster fires aren't as well understood. Why do they keep happening at such intensity?

One reason is that for years, groups that literally make a living by obstructing government efforts to manage forests have filed myriad lawsuits intended to delay, stall or stop anything resembling science.

They seek to prevent the federal government from implementing balanced efforts to manage the land, including efforts to thin forests and brushland to help prevent catastrophic wildfire.

Just last year in Southern California, the Center for Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit against reasonable forest management impacting more than 3.5 million acres in four National Forests. Interestingly, more than 100,000 of these same acres have now burned in the recent past in three of these forests - Angeles, San Bernardino and Cleveland. But the lawsuit proceeds.

The results are policies based on myth instead of science. Forests are wildly overgrown, with hundreds of trees per acre where only 50 to 70 have been historically. The trees become weak, unable to get the nutrients and water they needed to survive. And that's when bark beetles infest the trees that are too weak to fight back and many die - becoming perfect kindling for a catastrophic fire.

Standing firmly opposed to any real management of forests before this year's fires - and now as the flames die down - are unapologetic environmental extremists like the Center for Biological Diversity.

Unfortunately, this is not a unique situation.

Plans to reduce fire risk by removing excess trees that endanger the giant sequoias in the Giant Sequoia National Monument have been targeted for obstruction - even though thinning there was agreed to by environmental groups

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when the monument was created by President Bill Clinton.

No matter, another group called Earth Justice marched into court, beholden to a belief that no tree should ever be cut, the memory of the 2002 McNally Fire apparently lost on them. That fire burned more than 100,000 acres and came dangerously close to some of the giant sequoias. The Forest Service's plan would thin the forest in strategic locations including removing some small trees that act as "ladder fuels" that fires climb into taller trees.

But it's on hold now - leaving the ancient giants at risk even today.

And in 2004, two major fires hit Amador and El Dorado counties in Northern California, killing trees on tens of thousands of acres of forestland. Ash from the fire blanketed many areas, including Sacramento, where particulate in the air was 60 times the normal level, forcing people to stay indoors and canceling everything from family outings to football games.

After the fire, registered foresters and a variety of scientists recommended that the Forest Service allow private companies to reduce the future fire risk by removing dead and dying trees - and paying the government for the wood removed.

But rather than permitting the removal of these trees killed by wildfires and reducing future fire danger, extremist organizations sued, asking the court to block any removal.

Meanwhile, the dead and dying trees rotted further every day, losing their value, and robbing the government and taxpayers of any funds that these private companies might be willing to pay for the wood. Such moneys could have been used to restore public forestland.

Less than two months ago, this case was settled, allowing the Forest Service to remove some trees. But really, the three-year delay is a victory for the environmentalists since taxpayers won't see any costs offset by the sale of the wood. It's like in a football game where the winning team is already ahead so they run out the clock. And there won't be any replanting of trees for future generations.

If we want to pass along California's rich forestland to our children, its time we embraced a balanced approach to forest management and environmental protection, looking to science rather than rhetoric to make policy decisions.

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