



Policymakers need to find new solutions to wildfire risk

Many environmentalists look back 200 years ago and yearn for the majestic forests that grew before the European settlement of California.

Many in the timber industry look back 20 years and pine for the buzzing mills and the rough but respectable jobs that were the foundation of a thriving regional economy before the spotted owl wrecked it all.

The past belongs in a museum. Teary nostalgia only obstructs the hard work that must be done immediately to address the rapidly growing threat of catastrophic wildfire.

It's time instead to look forward, to focus our collective attention on what's achievable. In a special report spanning five weeks, the Record Searchlight laid out both the rising toll of fire and the potential for compromise and progress in preventing it.

Now, it's up to political and community leaders to act.

The members of Congress who represent the forested districts of the West - both Democrats and Republicans - must work together to reform Forest Service policies and refocus funding.

The extremes on both sides must be abandoned. Talk of hauling big trees out of deep wilderness will stop productive conversation; so will knee-jerk protectionism for every last tree in the forests around communities.

Biomass power generation, turning fire-prone brush and debris into electrical power, should be expanded.

Community leaders should copy the example of places like Weaverville, where the community has taken control of surrounding forest land and better managed it.

Both the forests themselves and the people who live near them are under increasing threat from wildfires whose scale has increased to catastrophic levels, breaking record after record over the past decade, torching millions of acres and costing billions of taxpayer dollars.

The reasons are complex and overlapping: subtle shifts in climate, overstocked forests, changes in firefighting tactics and simple bad luck. Scientific forecasts predict climate change will only make the situation worse, especially in the north state.

At a time when we most need solutions, the north state's elected officials have been ineffective. Rep. Wally Herger has represented a district with an enormous swath of federal lands for more than two decades. That should give him the relationships, the clout and the expertise to be shaping policy. Instead, he's stuck in old arguments, advocating for more logging and railing against environmental radicals.

Bill shows promise

Some politicians, though, are suggesting innovative solutions. Sen. Ron Wyden, a Democrat from Oregon, has drafted a bill, the Oregon Forest Restoration and Old Growth Protection Act, that at least tries to bridge the

political divide.

Wyden's measure would bar logging of the oldest remaining federal forests, with exceptions for thinning fire-prone dry inland forests. At the same time, it would dramatically streamline procedures elsewhere to encourage restoration of overstocked and unhealthy forests. It would ramp up community-based pilot projects in each national forest district in Oregon, and it would promote the sustainable use of thinned brush for energy production. Even with the old-growth restrictions, Wyden estimates that his bill would double federal timber harvests in his state.

Wyden's bill is only in draft form, but something along its lines could be the dramatic compromise we need to move forest policy forward. The only downside? It would apply only in Oregon. Last time we checked, the Northwest Forest Plan still includes the forested northern tier of California, and the problems and opportunities are the same. Members of Congress must work across state lines - and across party lines - to address the Western forests' troubles.

Project fails

Herger can point to one piece of bipartisan forest legislation with his name on it: the Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group Forest Recovery Act. The Quincy Library Group pilot project was an innovative compromise between timber and environmental interest groups - who sat down to talk at the Quincy Library. The ambitious thinning plan started with promise and has had some small successes, but overall, it has proven a frustrating bust.

Here's the thing about pilot projects: When they don't work, you try something new. But if Herger's had a fresh idea in the past decade, he hasn't seen fit to share it.

Are green groups systematically stonewalling the Quincy Library Group? Yes, but they've been successful in large part because the law and federal policies are on their side. And after eight years of the Bush administration, no ally of environmentalists, little has changed.

Indeed, in not a single year from 2001 to 2008 - an era spanning an epic housing boom that created huge demand for lumber - did timber harvests on public lands in California reach the level of the 1990s under the Clinton administration. If industry-friendly policies didn't prevail then, they never will.

Working together

The Quincy Library Group project has failed, but that doesn't mean community-driven forestry on federal lands cannot succeed. Indeed, one successful example is just a short drive up Highway 299 and over Buckhorn Summit.

The Weaverville Community Forest was founded in 2005 under a stewardship contract with the Bureau of Land Management, which oversees the original 1,000 acres. At the end of last year, the community forest expanded into another 12,000 acres of U.S. Forest Service land north of town, and a further expansion is in the works.

Managed by the Trinity County Resource Conservation District, the Weaverville forest is an example of real ground-up consensus, and the district has successfully thinned the forest, protected the neighboring community and its watershed, and supplied timber to the local mill - all while winning awards instead of generating lawsuits.

Let's be honest: The Weaverville Community Forest is small, and it's entirely possible that as it grows, so will controversies. But in the meantime it's working, and there's a lot to be said for starting modestly and building on success.

This is exactly the kind of collaboration that federal leaders must nurture - and that's what Sen. Wyden's bill would do. It would encourage a 25,000-acre local stewardship contract, with streamlined regulations, in each of his state's national forest districts. Again, why just in Oregon?

The role of biomass

The other road that we must start down is the use of small biomass energy plants as a way to productively and economically thin overstocked forests. This would help solve both the local problem of fire hazards and the global problem of climate change at the same time, and California law already encourages biomass electricity as a source of renewable power akin to wind or solar.

Unfortunately, federal standards are not so clear. Current U.S. law deems brush thinned from private land and burned in a cogeneration plant renewable, but denies the same tax and regulatory benefits if the brush comes from public land. Plainly, the energy is the same, and the reduced use of fossil fuels is the same. The different treatment is absurd. And as we push to develop sources of energy that won't further warm the planet, it's clear that burning biomass in efficient furnaces to generate power beats letting the woods simply go up in smoke.

Wyden's bill would bless thinnings from public lands as sustainable, and it would allow long-term contracts with the Forest Service so investors could count on a reliable supply of raw material to fuel their plants. Again, essential ideas - and not just for Oregon.

Biomass energy is no cure-all, and it can be controversial. Appeals and lawsuits have bedeviled a proposed expansion of Roseburg Forest Products' cogeneration plant in Weed, for example, in part because environmental activists fear it would create an insatiable new appetite for timber from public lands.

That concern is real, but contracts based on sustainable yields of brush, thinnings and small trees would make the path ahead clear.

And environmentalists need to do some hard thinking about how global warming and the need to change our sources of energy should change their perspective on what's sustainable.

Most scientists say our forests need more fire, that burning is healthy in the long run. But it's perilous to encourage more fires in unnaturally dense stands, especially when drought stress and insect infestations have left them thick with dead and diseased wood. On the other hand, if we thin and restore our forests first, our odds of safely introducing fire are far higher.

The unsustainable logging practices of the past caused the legal and political backlash that has paralyzed timber country, but there's nothing sustainable about these ever-growing wildfires.

Northern California needs a new way forward. We need to find economically viable ways to thin and restore forests so fire doesn't drive us from our homes. We need to find a new consensus that will put locals to work in the woods instead of serving as a full-employment act for lawyers.

Most of all, we need to keep trying to look toward the future instead of fighting the same tired battles over and over again.



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