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## My View: State fortunes will grow if forests are thinned

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If we work our diligent best to reduce the uncharacteristic fuel loads that drive catastrophic wildfires and restore resilient forests to California's landscape, we may one day have sustainable forests for generations of Californians to enjoy.

If in the process we save taxpayers millions, tap a reliable source of renewable energy and increase the carbon sequestration capacity of our forestlands, we may realize tremendous climate benefits from our forests that today remain out of reach.

But if the fear of short-term risk prevents the pursuit of those goals, Californians should brace for more costly and environmentally devastating wildfires.

The 2007 Angora fire burned 3,100 acres, 52 percent of that in high-intensity burns – the kind that rob soils of their nutrients, destroy owl-nesting sites and fill watercourses with thousands of cubic yards of ash, debris and sediment.

Wildfires have become increasingly common in California as public forests that have gone largely unmanaged become overgrown. Many Sierra forests now have 10 times more trees per acre than Gold Rush-era forests. Tree mortality around Lake Tahoe is up to 39 percent; in the southern Sierra it's 50 percent.

Realizing the benefits of thinning before fires and reforestation after fires carries some risk; not actively managing our forestlands has proved far more dangerous.

According to the U.S. Forest Service, catastrophic wildfires pose the greatest threat to spotted owl habitat. California wildfires in 2008 spewed millions of tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, the rough equivalent of 11 million cars on the road for a year. Residents in Trinity County experienced 87 unhealthy air days during the 2008 wildfire season. Post-fire rains in 2003 buried fish-spawning gravels and caused more than \$400 million in damage to water-quality infrastructure in the Santa Ana River watershed.

California wildfires cost taxpayers more than \$1.4 billion to fight last year. In the past five years, more than 10,000 structures and two dozen lives have been lost to wildfire. The number of severely burned acres in 2007 and 2008 was up 300 percent and 315 percent, respectively, over the previous five-year average.

More than a dozen lawsuits blocking forest management in the Sierra Nevada today have been tied up in court for more than four years. Some administrative appeals filed to stop harvesting cite concerns of increased sediment delivery to streams. In the cases where forest management

has been shown to increase sediment delivery, it has been on the order of 2 percent or less. The magnitude of what's going to hit Angora Creek is on a whole other scale.

Activists recently raised fears that harvesting trees on the Angora burn site may harm creeks and perhaps Lake Tahoe, and deemed the logging of dead trees killed by severe wildfire excessive – even though the trees in question were declared "hazard trees" and represent less than 3 percent of the burn area.

The objectionable harvest was done in full compliance with regulations that set some of the highest environmental standards in the world. It has resulted, according to water board officials, in no water quality degradation and has helped set the stage for reforestation to begin before the land is converted to brush field.

Yet activists raise fears.

As the wildfire season begins, more than 3 million homes stand at significant risk of a catastrophic wildfire. More than 10 million forested acres across watersheds that serve millions of Californians and hundreds of species are overgrown and at risk. Climate models predict higher temperatures, drier forests and more severe wildfires for California.

Enough new growth gets added to California's forests every year to stack a football field with a woodpile five miles high. Something has to be done with that wood. It can be put to good use through forest management that enhances wildlife habitat, reduces severe wildfire threats, provides "green" products such as lumber for homes, yields renewable energy and cleans the air, or be left to accumulate and burn. Active forest management is the difference.

But all too often, forest management is blocked, frequently by appeals ultimately found to be without scientific merit.

There have been 57 administrative appeals and lawsuits filed on the community-backed, activist-supported, congressionally authorized forest management program known as the Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group Pilot Project. Last year, the Moonlight and Camp fires raced through areas where appeals had blocked fuel reduction efforts and went on to destroy more than 20 owl nesting sites and burn the community of Concow to the ground.

A dry winter has set the stage for a potentially devastating fire season. May it be a safe one, and may we rise above fear to manage our forests so next year is safer still.

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