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Today's choices, tomorrow's forests

by Douglas D. Piirto, 3/12/2006

How America's forests look 10, 50 or 100 years from now depends in great part on the decisions we make today.

Most Americans sit on the side of forest-management debates. As long as they can buy lumber and vacation in forested mountains, all must be right with the world.

But nearly 12.5 million acres have burned in the West in the past five years. Lumber demand, meanwhile, is at an all-time high, driven by near-record housing starts.

Too often after fires, we watch valuable timber simply rot.

Look at Julian outside of San Diego, or around the Giant Sequoia National Monument where the McNally Fire burned 150,000 acres. Or in Placer, Amador and El Dorado counties, where the Freds, Power and Star Fires burned 40,000 acres, or in Southern California where the Old and Cedar Fires burned 370,000 acres.

The difference between reforesting charred landscapes and leaving them alone to let nature take its course can be as stark as night and day. Private forestland owners generally harvest dead trees after fires to accelerate the return of a healthy forest and keep their land productive. They plant native-species seedlings, minimize erosion and provide diverse wildlife habitat.

But on public lands, it's a different story. In many places where private land abuts public forestland, a distinct post-fire property line emerges with green trees on one side, shrubs and charred sticks on the other. Without reforestation, forestland conversion to brush field may be permanent, or the return of forests delayed a century or more.

Choices have to be made. It's not OK to sit by and watch.

Often, doing nothing after a catastrophic fire can cause the greatest harm to forest resources like soils and waterways. Post-fire rain can lead to mass erosion and mud slides. Charred trees falling on their own can increase future fire danger.

We seem willing to spend millions to fight fires, but not to restore the national forests they destroy — even though we could do so at virtually no cost to taxpayers.

Removing dead trees and creating a landscape where trees can grow is a critical first step in forest restoration. But timing is everything.

Fire-killed trees rot and lose their value quickly, usually within a year or so. Charging forestry companies to harvest some dead trees they could then sell to sawmills could generate revenue to fund reforestation. But delays can be fatal.

Delays from "analysis paralysis" and scientifically unfounded appeals of reforestation plans can cost taxpayers millions. After two fires in the Tahoe National Forest in 2001, for example, the USDA Forest Service estimates such delays cost about \$5 million in lost revenue. Consequently, reforestation that could be self-funding goes largely undone.

For most of the past half-century, charred forests were harvested and replanted as a matter of course and common sense. Many forests today, like those east of Sacramento that surround the Big and Sugar Pine reservoirs, are the result of post-fire restoration. Today, the Forest Service tries to restore only a small portion of charred lands and most of those efforts are blocked.

We have the science and technology to safely and efficiently harvest, replant and manage fire-damaged forests. We can harvest wood and reduce erosion. We can renew forestland while providing diverse wildlife habitat and helping to meet a growing demand for wood.

Are our other options really preferable? Should we leave hillsides blackened? Harvest other forestland more aggressively? Stop using wood in favor of non-renewable materials like concrete and steel whose production increases greenhouse gas emissions?

The Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act now being debated in Congress is an attempt to return common sense to forest restoration and expedite forest recovery. It doesn't relax environmental protections, but accelerates decision-making and public review processes to create a more efficient system for forestry professionals to regenerate forestland.

We have the means to save our forests. Let's fix the system.

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