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Living with fire in California: A little smoke now prevents a lot more later

By Craig Thomas, Jim Branham And Jim McDougald

After the fire season we experienced in 2017, decision makers across California are looking for solutions that safeguard our communities, improve our air quality and protect our forests from what may be the “new normal” in California. Destructive wildfires represent a true threat and efforts to minimize this risk need to be a high priority – and one of the responses needed may surprise you.

Scientists in California and throughout the West have been publishing a steady stream of research papers for more than 20 years calling for the re-establishment of fire as a critical ecological process and restoration tool. They have warned of dire consequences if we fail to use fire this way, and those consequences have arrived.

Fire that benefits nature and humans has been operating on our landscape for tens of thousands of years. As development occurred in California, fire suppression activities significantly increased, and the use of fire as a management tool decreased. As a result, fire has been largely removed from its natural, restorative role in maintaining resilience in our forests throughout the state. We now understand the unintended outcome: events like the Rim, King, and Sonoma-area fires that do more damage than good for both humans and the environment. We will continue to need aggressive suppression efforts to protect communities and landscapes given current conditions, but at the same time we need to dramatically increase the use of fire to prevent such devastating events in the future.

While scientists warn of increasingly large, high-intensity fires, increased release of forest carbon into the atmosphere, and increased mega-emission events causing massive public health and economic impacts, there is one consistent recommendation that is stated repeatedly in the majority of published science pertaining to forest resilience, climate change and public health. The recommendation is to re-establish fire’s role as a key part of natural resource management. In fact, Gov. Brown recently issued an executive order calling for an increase in the use of prescribed fire to promote forest health across the state. Fire and appropriate mechanical treatment are the best tools that we have to address forest health.

Living with fire, the process of educating and supporting the public, communities, policy makers and natural resource managers in efforts to re-establish appropriate fire in the California landscape cannot be understated. Multiple efforts are underway throughout the state to reintroduce fire into fire-excluded forests at appropriate scale, intensity and timing.

The recent Dinkey South prescribed burn is one example. The Sierra National Forest worked with air quality managers in the San Joaquin Valley to complete a 350 acre prescribed burn in the Dinkey Creek watershed near the community of Shaver Lake. Forest managers with the Sierra National Forest and [air quality managers in the San Joaquin Valley should be commended](#) for working together to complete these projects, and for recognizing that working with fire is a better choice for public health and safety than unplanned wildfire where we have little say or control of outcomes.

Sierra Forest Legacy, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, Cal Fire and several other organizations want to see fire restored across the Sierra Nevada region to protect communities, stabilize carbon storage, sustain pristine old-growth forests, promote high-quality watersheds and protect recreational assets so that our Sierra forests can be enjoyed by future generations of Californians.

With astronomical fire suppression costs, growing public health impacts, and resource damage from mega-emission wildfires, and the state’s forest carbon sequestration goals going up in smoke, we have found a new path forward to address these challenging issues.

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