

Opinion: Plan will make California's forests healthy

By Tom Vilsack

America's forests are one of our nation's great treasures. Not only are they wonderful places to be outside with friends and family, they provide us with much of the water we drink, clean the air we breathe, provide habitat for wildlife, and support jobs and growth in rural communities.

Healthy forests are critical to President Obama's vision for an economy that's built to last. More than 173 million visitors come to national forests and grasslands every year to hike, bike, view wildlife, go hunting, fishing and rafting and enjoy being in the great outdoors. This generates billions of dollars and supports hundreds of thousands of middle-class jobs for local communities. Forests and grasslands also support good jobs related to timber and forest products, energy and other multiple uses of our public lands.



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The water provided by our public lands – including clean drinking water used by about 20 million Californians – is key to healthy communities and a strong economy. In California, USDA-managed national forests alone provide half of the state's water, used by countless farmers and ranchers while providing habitat for wildlife. The water from national forests also contributes to the president's vision for an

American energy economy, supporting clean hydroelectric plants that power 2.3 million California homes each year.

That's why management of the 193 million acres of forests and grasslands overseen by USDA's U.S. Forest Service is so important. Last month, I announced the department's intended course of action in finalizing a new "Forest Planning Rule," which will guide management on the National Forest System – including how the 18 national forests in California develop management plans.

A revised planning rule is long overdue. The 1982 rule does not reflect the past 30 years of new science and changing public values. It is also cumbersome and expensive, with plans taking five to seven years on average to complete. As a result, more than half of our land management plans are more than 15 years old and are past due for revision. Revisions under a new rule would take less time and cost less money while producing better results for people and the environment.

To develop our preferred option for a final rule, we listened to input from the public: holding the most collaborative rule-making process in the agency's history and carefully considering more than 300,000 comments. The public asked for a rule that is grounded in science, restores our forests to improve forest health, reduces wildfires, and protects water and wildlife. Our proposal does all these things while ensuring that our national forests contribute to the economic vitality of local communities by providing for recreation, forest products, energy and other multiple uses.

Forest management in California has often been characterized by conflict among environmentalists and forest industry. But today we are seeing an increasing number of efforts in California and across the country where diverse stakeholders are working together to restore forests in ways that protect water resources, reduce wildfire and provide jobs for local communities.

Our goal is to encourage just these types of collaborative efforts, requiring opportunities for public participation throughout the planning process. Once the rule is finalized, Californians will have the opportunity to lead the way in promoting this collaboration. Indeed, the Inyo, Sequoia and Sierra national forests in California will be among the first in the nation to begin revising their plans under the new rule.

Our public lands belong to us all, whether you can look out your window to the forest, visit for a hike a few times each year, or live in a city and drink water from our forests each day. As we work toward an economy that is built to last, we share a responsibility to also rebuild our natural resources.

The proposal we announced will do just that, ensuring that we build a strong green infrastructure with restored watersheds, resilient ecosystems, habitat for wildlife, opportunities for healthy outdoor recreation and support for job opportunities. In the months to come, we look forward to finalizing and implementing a final rule to build a framework to invest in our national forests so that they are ecologically strong and support healthy and prosperous communities for the long term.

Tom Vilsack is secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.