

Opinion: Unnatural forests are depleting water supply

By Helen M. Poulos and James G. Workman

Ronald Reagan once justified logging with “a tree is a tree; how many more do you need to look at?” Besides, he warned, “trees cause more pollution than automobiles.” We cringed at his biases. Yet due to forces none foresaw, Reagan’s gaffes may now ring true.

Today, the hottest and thirstiest parts of the United States are best described as over-forested. Vigorous federal protection has stocked semiarid regions of public land with several billion trees too many. And day after day these excess trees deplete a natural resource that has become far more precious than toilet paper or 2-by-4’s: water.

Scientists and water managers report that 39 states face water scarcity. Much of the nation’s freshwater shortfall comes from our population growth, waste, hunger and contaminants. But we must also now implicate the escalating thirst of unnatural forests.

Water depletion from afforestation – the establishment of trees or tree stands where none previously were – is the unintended consequence of a wildly popular federal policy. For millenniums, fires set by lightning or Native Americans limited forest stocks to roughly a few dozen trees per acre. All that changed after the nationally terrifying Big Blowup wildfires of 1910, which led the United States to in effect declare war on wildfire. The government’s wartime-like tactics included security watchtowers, propaganda, aerial bombing and color-coded threat alerts. Uncle Sam trained elite Hotshot and Smokejumper crews to snuff out enemy flames. Congress annually funded the war effort with an emergency blank check, now \$2.5

billion.

Helen M. Poulos is a fire ecologist and postdoctoral teaching fellow at Wesleyan University's College of the Environment. James G. Workman, a former wildland forest firefighter, is a visiting professor at Wesleyan and the author of "Heart of Dryness".

Read the whole story