

Opinion: Collaboration emerges from ashes

By William Wade Keye

Disaster sometimes comes with a silver lining. Last summer's 257,000-acre Rim Fire torched more than trees. The enormous blaze, which incinerated a large swath of the Stanislaus National Forest near Yosemite National Park, knocked out power transmission and threatened San Francisco's water supply. It also cleared away some of the toxic social underbrush that has stymied federal forest management efforts for many years. This could lead to more fire-adapted, resilient and carbon-rich public forests across vast stretches of Northern California.

A Tuolumne County group, which includes timber industry and environmental representatives, had been meeting prior to the Rim Fire, searching for – and finding – common ground on previously deadlocked issues of forest management. Formed under the auspices of a 2009 law promoting ecological restoration, the Yosemite-Stanislaus Solutions collaborative is at the forefront of a new approach that is bringing people together to heal broken landscapes. The old “spotted owl versus logger” polarities have given way to fresh consensus, with fire ecology at its core.

Collaborative participants agreed on a mission “to restore and maintain healthy forests and watersheds, fire-safe communities and sustainable local economies using a science-based approach.” Since the Rim Fire, the collaborative has been aggressively pushing recovery efforts, which will include clearing dead trees from roadsides and replanting some of the most damaged sites. These restoration treatments begin with salvage logging, and this is where the story gets interesting.

Environmental members of the collaborative are sending a

message to fellow conservationists that the days of routinely demonizing timber harvest on public lands may be coming to an end. An April letter from the group to Regional Forester Randy Moore, who oversees all the national forests in California, explained, "While individual members in YSS may prefer one or another of the possible salvage treatment alternatives, we all agree that prompt implementation of the hazard tree and salvage logging projects is essential to move the restoration process forward. Once salvage plans are completed, reforestation, watershed restoration, fuel reduction, and habitat enhancement plans can be given priority attention."

This kind of consensus has been a long time coming, but it reflects growing concerns about the sustainability of our national forests in a time of climate change and increasingly destructive wildfires. California's national forests are racking up ever-greater acreages of what the U.S. Forest Service terms "deforested conditions" following extreme wildfires such as the Rim Fire. These are situations where most, if not all, of the existing trees have been killed. Without replanting with trees, many of these burned acres will become choked with brush species, which store much less carbon than healthy timber stands.

The trend is now so firmly established that the Forest Service projects that by mid-century, our national forests will emit more greenhouse gases than they absorb. In other words, federal lands set aside for broad conservation purposes are on track to becoming major carbon polluters.

Yet this outcome is entirely avoidable.

Besides tree planting, forest restoration work requires an increased use of tools proven to reduce wildfire risks; thinning, chipping and prescribed fire. In some cases, selective timber harvest may be ecologically desirable, especially to improve site-growing conditions for long-lived and drought-tolerant Sierra Nevada pine species.

In addition to wildfire concerns, there is renewed focus on watershed health. This is especially important in California where most of our fresh water supply originates in our mountainous national forests.

Some organizations will continue to fight the old timber wars from the 1990s, raising alarms, fundraising and litigating to maintain their prestige and power over public land policies. Others, like the Yosemite collaborative members Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center and Tuolumne Group of the Sierra Club, are helping to move the forest management debate forward. Similar collaboratives have formed throughout the West to begin the process of revitalizing depressed rural economies.

Environmentalists who support forest restoration and ecosystem resilience are leading the way. Those clinging to past misgivings and ideological purity are being moved toward the exits.

Will some interest groups litigate to try to put a stop to the Forest Service's recovery plans? Probably, but I hope not.

Even if the federal government, with the support of the collaborative, authorizes salvage logging, there will be plenty of dead trees left to decay naturally. The state's wood-processing industry isn't what it used to be. Even if the Forest Service wanted to clear all the dead trees – which it doesn't – California sawmills couldn't possibly absorb that much timber before it decays and loses commercial value.

There is something for everybody in the Rim Fire's aftermath, most particularly the prospect of a healing, and not just for the land, but for the people who dearly want to see that land nurtured and sustained.

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