

# Opinion: Healthy forest critical for Tahoe

By Joanne Marchetta

With California and Nevada grappling with a third year of drought, one of the largest and most complex challenges we face over the long run at Lake Tahoe is adapting to a changing climate.

Climate change will affect the protection and restoration of our beautiful mountain lake as well as the expansive forests around it. And the health of our lake, forests, and communities are all intertwined.

Maintaining healthy forests here at Tahoe and also across the greater Sierra Nevada will be a critical issue as California works to confront its water scarcity problems and maintain water quality and quantity for nearly 40 million residents.



Joanne  
Marchetta

About 60 percent of California's drinking water originates in the Sierra Nevada forests and the headwaters they shelter. Protecting the health of our Sierra Nevada forests is one and the same with protecting our communities and our water resources from fire.

The King Fire that broke out in western El Dorado County in

September and burned nearly 100,000 acres is just the latest example showing that we have much work to do to better manage our forests and their watersheds. That same message was driven home by the “State of the Sierra Nevada’s Forests” report the Sierra Nevada Conservancy released in October.

Forests in the Sierra Nevada are overgrown and susceptible to wildfire and funding is not available to adequately treat them. That’s not to say the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and its partner agencies in the basin have sat idle – far from it.

Working together as the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team, agencies in the basin are leading by example – collaborating to secure funding to reduce fuel loads, prioritize the work and get it done. From 2008 to 2013, almost 37,000 acres in the basin were treated for hazardous fuels by local, state, and federal agencies.

Our projects have been keeping up with our plans, but much more remains to be done. Adequately reducing hazardous fuels in the forests around our watersheds and our communities will require more funding, a situation that’s true here at Tahoe and throughout the rest of the Sierra Nevada.

That’s why TRPA is asking Congress to adopt the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2013. The bill would authorize \$415 million over 10 years to pay for environmental restoration projects, watercraft inspections and control efforts to fight invasive species, the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout Recovery Plan, and scientific research. Nearly one-third of the funding, \$135 million, would pay for hazardous fuels reduction projects.

We know treating forests to reduce hazardous fuels is far more cost effective than fighting wildfires. One recent study estimated that fighting wildfires between 10 and 100 acres in size in our forests costs \$2,000 to \$3,000 per acre. That’s two- to three-times as much as projects to reduce hazardous fuel loads in them.

The Angora Fire that burned on Lake Tahoe's South Shore in 2007 destroyed 254 homes, cost almost \$7,500 per acre to fight, and on top of that, caused about \$150 million in damage – all within a 3,100-acre area that is small compared to other recent fires that have burned hundreds of thousands of acres in California.

In addition to funding, maintaining healthy forests and watersheds in the Sierra Nevada will also require extensive relationship building and collaboration across political boundaries. Communities inside the region will have to work together and with communities outside the region. Members of the public, too, must ensure they have adequate defensible space around their homes and do what they can to be part of the solution as we try to create what are called fire-adapted communities.

This challenge represents an opportunity for stakeholders to seek significant progress through multiple-benefit fuel reduction projects that not only protect our many communities from fire, but also improve the health of our forests, reduce erosion, and protect the water sources millions of people rely on. The time to act is now. Please join us at any scale in finding solutions to the next set of challenges, even those as daunting as the long-term effects of climate change here in our beloved Sierra Nevada.

*Joanne Marchetta is executive director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.*