

Opinion: USFS doesn't leave when the fire is out

By Randy Moore

Natural disasters can occur at any given time and in any given area. The size, duration and damages are usually unpredictable. The devastation, destruction and cost of California wildfires are increasing annually.

In 2017, more than 1,500 wildfires burned over 640,000 acres on National Forest System lands in California, including the Thomas Fire which is now the largest in California history. Although the fire is fully contained, the surrounding communities are presently dealing with debris flows caused by a now charred and barren landscape that no longer has the protection of trees, grass and other vegetation for a stable ground. To date, 17 people have died, several others are still missing, and more than 100 homes have been destroyed as a result of these mudslides.



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Additionally, in early October, a series of wind-driven wildfires burned more than 200,000 acres across Northern California. The fires destroyed thousands of structures and killed 44 people. Although the fires did not occur on Forest Service lands, the agency worked closely with state and local cooperators on fire suppression efforts.

The Pacific Southwest Region has spent over \$500 million preventing or suppressing wildfires over the last year. Funding for suppression efforts performed by the Forest Service comes from the overall agency's budget based on a 10-year rolling average—a model that is simply unsustainable, given the last several years of unprecedented fire seasons. When wildfire suppression funding is insufficient, the Forest Service is forced to shift money away from other investments designed to build healthy, resilient forests and communities. We must find a permanent solution that restores the balance between fire prevention, fire suppression and resource restoration.

As mentioned above, many residents in California have suffered significant harm and loss from recent fires and mudslides. We see and empathize with those affected, and are working to reduce the potential for future loss by performing hazardous fuel reduction treatments. In fiscal year 2017 alone, we performed fuels reduction treatments on over 310,000 acres of Forest Service lands across the state, but there is more to be done. To date, 80 million acres of National Forest System lands are currently at moderate to high risk of insects, disease or fire. Of these, 10 million acres are located in California. Essentially, the more acres we treat, the healthier our forests become, contributing to safer and more resilient communities. The science, data and monitoring shows that hazardous fuel treatments and thinning positively affects fire behavior and lowers the catastrophic risk of fire damage. A fire funding fix will allow the USDA Forest Service to invest more in this critical work.

We are appreciative of the ongoing work of USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue and Congress who have acknowledged the funding issue and are working hard to help resolve these challenges.

Fortunately, there is bipartisan support from key leaders in Congress toward legislation to reform the way wildfire suppression is currently funded. Finding a permanent solution

to fix the fire funding problem will go a long way in sustaining the health, diversity and productivity of our nation's forests and grasslands for current and future generations.

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