

Opinion: More funds means less money for USFS projects

By Randy Moore

Last year, more than 1,500 wildfires burned over 640,000 acres on National Forest System lands in California, including the Thomas Fire, the largest fire in California's recorded history. The surrounding communities are still dealing with damage from debris flows caused by a charred and barren landscape that no longer has the protection of trees, grass and other vegetation.



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We see and empathize with those affected, and are working to reduce the potential for future loss by performing hazardous fuel reduction treatments which include thinning overstocked forests and prescribed burning.

The Forest Service is increasingly challenged to provide the personnel and management needed to maintain these services; infrastructure, such as roads, trails and campgrounds; and the health and resiliency of our public forests. The Pacific Southwest Region spent in excess of \$500 million preventing or suppressing wildfires over the past year. While nationally, Forest Service suppression costs exceeded \$2.4 billion last year, more than ever before. Fire alone accounted for 57 percent of the agency's budget in 2017, up from just 16 percent in 1995. At this rate, suppression costs will take up

67 percent of the Forest Service's budget by 2021.

Currently, 10 million acres of National Forest System lands in California are at moderate to high risk from insects, disease or fire. The science, data and monitoring shows that hazardous fuel treatments positively affect fire behavior and lowers the catastrophic risk of fire damage. Essentially, the more acres we treat, the healthier our forests become, contributing to safer and more resilient communities. In 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.

Funding for suppression efforts performed by the Forest Service on National Forest System lands as well as those under other ownership, comes from the agency's overall budget which means less money for other Forest Service programs and services. The Forest Service is the only federal agency that is required to fund its entire emergency management program through its regular appropriations. About a third of the Forest Service's total spending on fire goes toward 1 to 2 percent of the fires it fights.

Megafires, like the Thomas Fire, are national disasters. It would make sense to deal with them as such: through a separate national emergency fund to stop the drain on the funding for the work we care most about. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue and the Forest Service deeply appreciate the ongoing work of Congress to pass new legislation to reform the way wildfire suppression is funded, supporting our efforts to meet the many different needs of the communities we serve, for the benefit of generations to come.

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