Study: Runoff boost from forest thinning

By Matt Weiser, Water Deeply

A century of fire suppression has left Western forests overgrown. That has interrupted nature's regular fire cycle and means that when fires do happen, they become catastrophic because there is plentiful fuel to burn. It also means forests are sucking up more water than they did historically.

How much more water? That's always been difficult to estimate. But making this calculation could go a long way toward fixing the overgrown forest problem. If we know how much water could be freed up by thinning forests to reduce fire danger, it could create a new financing mechanism to do the expensive work of cutting trees and staging controlled burns.

A team of scientists from the University of California and the National Park Service now has some answers. In a new study, they combined sensors that measure evapotranspiration – how much water trees exhale – with satellite images of "greenness" on the landscape to estimate the additional freshwater runoff that could be created by thinning overgrown forests.

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