

Building consensus a priority for Sierra

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SAN ANDREAS - The big question for the Sierra Nevada region isn't whether to cut or not to cut, but rather how much and what combination of big and small trees, according to a state agency charged with preserving the region's health.

That's why the Sierra Nevada Conservancy is proposing a "Sustainable Sierra Nevada Initiative," a plan to make peace between the factions that war over logging, restore at least some lost jobs in the region (including at lumber mills), and improve the health of forests.

The idea is that neither the past pattern of wholesale clear-cutting nor the present system of preserved forests prone to devastating wildfires is good for the region. So the conservancy is asking for public comments on its sustainability initiative and plans to consider adopting the measure as soon as June 3.

"I think we should absolutely support the basic concept," said Paolo Maffei, the Tuolumne County Supervisor who represents Amador, Calaveras, Tuolumne and Mariposa counties on the Sierra Nevada Conservancy board. "We need to build the consensus that a viable and healthy forest industry is essential to our local economies. We need the jobs."

That consensus has emerged already in some Sierra communities. The Amador/Calaveras Consensus Group, for example, began in West Point as the outgrowth of a program to train workers in the skills needed to thin overgrown forests.

The Amador/Calaveras Consensus Group includes environmentalists, officials with local national forests and the Bureau of Land Management, private logging industry representatives and local elected leaders.

Participants say that all the interests have something to gain.

Environmentalists and federal officials who want to see endangered spotted owl habitat preserved, for example, have an interest in preventing catastrophic wildfires that would destroy the owls.

That, in turn, means they want a viable economy where enough forest thinning and logging happens to keep forests healthy and reduce the severity of fires. Loggers, for their part, want a forestry plan that allows them to do business without the fear of constant environmental lawsuits. And local elected leaders want jobs to ease the suffering in communities where mills have closed.

The local consensus group helped negotiate deals that will soon allow wood chips from forest thinning to fuel an electrical power plant in Ione, something that Calaveras County Supervisor Steve Wilensky, a founder of the consensus group, says will generate 150 jobs.

Still, even when local interests agree, there's plenty that can go wrong.

The Center for Biological Diversity, a national environmental group, recently wrote a letter expressing concern over greenhouse gas emissions at the biomass plant, and that triggered additional environmental study that will delay the plant's opening a year.

That frustrates Wilensky, who said negotiations on the forest contracts to supply chips to the Buena Vista Biomass Power project in Ione were modeled, in part, on a similar arrangement that Center for Biological Diversity supported in the White Mountains of Arizona.

Now Wilensky is marshalling members of the local consensus group to meet with Center for Biological Diversity representatives in hopes of persuading the larger group to relent and allow the project to proceed.

"A moment like this is a real test for the work that we've done," Wilensky said.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy hopes to help solve problems like that and to spread the consensus group approach to the entire region. The Conservancy was formed by Gov. Schwarzenegger in 2004 to improve the environment, economy and social well-being in the region.

Although much of the conservancy's early work focused on watershed restoration, officials soon realized there was no hope of solving environmental problems in the long term without a viable local economy.

In part, that could be through conversion of old mills to produce fence posts, garden mulch chips and other products that can use the smaller-diameter wood from forest thinning.

In part, it could be through adding new industries that could create finished products from wood that carries a higher value than milled wood. It could come from sales of wood chips to serve as fuel in electrical generation plants.

Jim Brahnam, executive officer of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, said the larger society also benefits from well managed, healthy forests, in particular because healthy forests protect the water supply of millions who live downstream.

"It does suggest that there are public benefits that ought to be borne by the larger public," Branham said.

Already, federal dollars and other grant sources are aiding conversion projects and watershed restoration projects in the Sierra. But can forests here generate enough economic production in the long run to both boost employment and pay for necessary thinning?

Those in the business say Sierra forests are extremely productive and will be more productive once they recover from years of neglect.

"At least 70 percent of the wood we use in California comes from someplace else. We could do better than that," said Gary Nakamura, University of California Cooperative Extension forestry specialist.

Branham acknowledges that how to pay the costs of converting the industry and restoring health to area forests remains to be worked out. But several years of visiting communities that once flourished as logging towns has convinced him of the need to start working on the problem.

"To not make this effort is unacceptable," Branham said.

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