


Our View: This new partnership of groups could mean that something is actually done about forest health

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[f](#) [t](#) [e](#) [p](#) [b](#)

Thursday, the day before the one-year anniversary of the devastating Camp Fire, agencies and organizations got together near New Bullards Bar Dam and announced the creation of the North Yuba Forest Partnership.

It has the potential of turning out to be as significant as the creation of Yuba Water Agency and construction of the dam all those decades ago. It might mean, eventually, that conflagrations such as the Camp Fire are less likely to happen.

And if it works out, it could influence work around the world.

The announcement was prefaced with acknowledgements:

That decades of unchecked vegetation growth and the changing climate are contributing to the uptick in forest fires across California.

That part of what's making forests unhealthy is overcrowding from small trees and brush, according to Eli Llano of the Tahoe National Forest. That puts the forests at greater risk of high-severity wildfire – the kind that sweeps over great swaths of land and destroys resources, communities, people.

That's due, he said, to historic timber harvesting practices, fire suppression policies, and climate change.

The groups signed a memorandum of understanding to work together over the next couple decades to increase the pace and scale of restoration, focusing on community safety, forest health and resiliency through landscape-scale restoration, it was reported. Those groups include: Blue Forest Conservation, Camptonville Community Partnership, National Forest Foundation, The Nature

Conservancy, Nevada City Rancheria, Sierra County, South Yuba River Citizens League, U.S. Forest Service-Tahoe National Forest, and our own Yuba Water Agency.

They want to reduce fire risk and increase resiliency in the North Yuba River watershed – affecting some 275,000 acres. Projects and work they'll be engaged in could include clearing underbrush, thinning smaller trees, managed burns, reforestation, and meadow restoration. Highest priority jobs, they announced, will be at-risk communities, emergency response, evacuation access routes, forests of critical ecological importance, and areas that have the potential to stop a wildfire from spreading.

That seems, when considering the last century or so of often misguided forest management, like an extremely lofty set of goals. That's why a partnership amongst this diverse group of interests is most valuable.

Yuba Water Agency board chairman Brent Hastey added some comment to the news release:

– What does “landscape-scale restoration” mean? It acknowledges the massive scale of this work. Don't think “landscaping” as in the yard around your home ... think of the landscape up and down the watershed.

“That means it covers the entire watershed ... a vast area,” he said. “One of the great challenges in California is that (restoration work) is mostly done on a small scale ... around a town, a neighborhood ... but really, it needs to go all up and down the state. Big scale.”

– And restoration means they take out overgrowth. They will have to figure out what to do with that woody material ... some number of various biomass projects, probably.

– Resiliency means, in simplest of terms, that the forest is able to survive. It's healthy, the ingredients for sustainability are present.

– YWA's role? Beyond just its share in the visionary role, it's going to be bankrolling some of the work along with other sources. The agency has come into a stream of revenue via the turning over in 2016 of power generation capability from Pacific Gas and Electric Co. to YWA. How is the agency to spend the 10s of millions of dollars? The legislation that was enacted to bring the agency into existence limited use of generated funds to water-related projects. Resiliency of the watershed landscape is certainly within that realm and could do the entire region a lot of good in terms of safety, water, resources.

“It means we're trying to take the lead in making sure we have a protected forest...” he said. “The goal we set out to our team was to become the first fully-managed watershed in the state.”

How does YWA's involvement benefit Yuba County citizens? Forest restoration and resiliency makes a difference to all the traditional YWA missions – flood safety to water supply. Hastey reminded us that in a time of climate change, we'll have to start thinking about how to get water in different ways. This project can look at how to make snowpack last longer, how to store water in other ways. And beyond all that, this partnership could bring lots of jobs, he said.

"It takes a lot of work to clean forests up. And ... we lost a couple generations of foresters and have to train up a new group."

That's amongst a plethora of benefits you can winnow from this new partnership.

But one of the real values? Instead of one political party grouching about another political party's environmental profile, we're identifying real problems and planning to actually do something, and the combination of federal, private, local agency and conservation and environmental groups partnering up could make all the difference.

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