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Another View: Initiative protects our Sierra forests and communities

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This week the Placer County Board of Supervisors and the Auburn City Council voted to support the Sierra Nevada Forest and Community Initiative, an effort sponsored by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy to address the health of our forests and local communities. We believe it is a step in the right direction.

The Initiative is a coordinated effort among local governments, environmental/conservation organizations, the private sector, federal and state agencies and tribal entities to identify and implement actions that will improve forest health and create local economic activity in the region. The Conservancy is fostering collaboration locally and regionally in an effort to bring diverse entities together and find areas of agreement, which will result in reducing fire risk, creating jobs, and protecting our priceless natural resources.

As former lumber mill towns, Auburn and Foresthill have always had a close relationship with the forest, as do many other Sierra towns. Today, many communities have little or no capacity to utilize wood and biomass removed from the forest. In fact, today there are only two mills currently operating on a full time basis between Interstate 80 and the Mexican border.

Clearly the opportunity exists for the development of appropriately scaled wood processing facilities to assist in the stewardship of our forests needed to restore forest health and reduce fire risk.

Likewise, the generation of renewable energy from biomass, something Placer County is actively pursuing, provides yet another positive outcome.

For many years issues relating to forest management on our public lands have too often resulted in litigation, conflict and a lack of necessary actions. This fact, combined with successful fire suppression efforts, has led to the current condition of our forests.

While fire has always been a part of our Sierra ecosystem, large damaging fires in these conditions destroy homes and severely damage habitat as well as air and water quality.

Unfortunately these fires are becoming more frequent. According to the state Board of Forestry statistics, three of the worst fire years in the past six decades have all occurred since the year 2000.

On this, anniversary of the 49 Fire, we obviously know firsthand what can happen when you live in what fire officials call the wild land/urban interface, as many of us do in Placer County. Our mountain communities live each summer knowing that the potential for an uncontrolled fire is ever present.

But the threat is far reaching. It is important to note **the roughly 65 percent of California's developed water comes** from Sierra watersheds. Sierra Nevada forests, when healthy, also act as air scrubbers and store large amounts of carbon. Wildlife and humans depend on them for our very existence. When they burn up in large damaging fires, we all lose. Getting our forests healthy again will benefit all Californians.

Thanks in part to the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, there exists an exciting new opportunity for the Sierra Nevada region. The Conservancy is providing leadership and facilitation in bringing parties, many of whom have spent decades fighting with each other, together to find a better way to deal with these issues.

We in local government are joining this movement toward consensus because it is the right way to address these issues and our past and current approach is simply not working. Using science and learning from other examples of success stories provides the basis for this new way.

We support the Conservancy's efforts with this Initiative. Moving beyond traditional arguments by shifting focus to mutually agreeable principles will allow the region to emerge as a national leader in collaborative forest management.

It's a win for the forests, our environment, energy production, and our economy