

Stop Wasting Forest Waste

FORESTS HOLD POTENTIAL FOR JOBS AND CLEAN ENERGY

By Roderick D. Wright, State Senator (D-Inglewood)

Southern Californians can no longer afford to take an “out of sight, out of mind” approach to the state’s forestlands.



Severe wildfire is on the rise, firefighting costs are skyrocketing and people in rural communities are out of work in staggering numbers.

Our forests seldom look how urban Californians often envision. More than half the trees on Southern California’s national forestlands are dead or dying. Aggressive fire-suppression policies and timber harvest restrictions have led to overgrown forests and dangerous fuel loads on more than 8 million acres. Meanwhile, Californians import about 80 percent of our wood from places where we have no say over environmental practices and willingly spend more than a billion tax dollars fighting wildfire each year.

Studies show that one of the most efficient ways to create jobs in this state can also reduce wildfire severity, lower firefighting expenditures, provide clean energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. All we need to do is create an environment that encourages investment in sustainable forest management.

Creating jobs in forests leads to jobs in transportation, lumber yards and elsewhere. Investing in sustainable forest management can create about twice as many jobs per dollar as investing in mass transit, school construction or new roads, and five times more jobs per dollar than investments in coal or oil and gas infrastructure.

Forestry also offers a unique way to recycle forest waste into renewable energy while decreasing the amount of fuel available to drive catastrophic wildfires. In a report for the California Energy Commission, the USDA Forest Service found that managing forests to reduce fuels can tap a new energy source and result in a “dramatic drop” in wildfire severity, a 65 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and millions of dollars of savings in firefighting costs.

Clean energy, safer communities

Biomass energy, a by-product of sustainable forest management, takes the dead trees, accumulated overgrowth and forest residues that might otherwise go up in smoke and instead uses them to produce electricity. Using forest residues to produce energy reduces emissions from wildfire and from burning fossil fuels for energy while helping to keep firefighters and communities safe.

But according to the Forest Service, “the economics of private forestland management historically have constrained opportunities for sustainable management.” The potential energy, budget and emissions savings make now the time to change that.

California’s current regulatory climate has escalated a forest health and wildfire crisis and left the state’s forestry

infrastructure in shambles. More than 40 percent of the state’s sawmills have closed in the past decade, taking with them the family wage jobs that for years have been the cornerstone of rural communities.

Focus on resource independence

While California boasts the highest environmental standards in the world, our forestry regulations have become overwhelmingly complex and counterproductive. Operating costs often run 10 times higher for California forestry companies than forestry companies in neighboring states, and costs to taxpayers have more than doubled in recent years even though the amount of forestry being regulated has dropped roughly 40 percent.

Rather than continue a trend of increasing wildfire severity, firefighting costs and greenhouse gas emissions, California should conserve forest resources, reduce our dependency on imported wood and energy, and restore vibrant forests to the landscape.

Our greatest challenge is putting California back to work and our greatest responsibility may be sustaining healthy forestlands for future generations. We must seize the opportunity to do both and create policy to encourage long-term investment in sustainable forest management. ■