

# Forestry infrastructure key to lower emissions



by  
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**S**B144 appears to be an effort to encourage carbon sequestration on California's forestlands. But in its current form, SB144 would harm California's forestry infrastructure to the point of diminishing our forests' ability to sequester carbon. The bill's goal and stipulations are not in sync. Only with a working forestry infrastructure can we realize the potential of California's forests to lower greenhouse gas emissions and capitalize on a form of renewable energy more efficient than solar and more reliable than wind.

While other industries are feverishly trying to reduce emissions, forestry is unique in its ability to remove carbon from the air. Of the 165 business sectors identified by the California Air Resources Board, the forest sector is the only one that sequesters carbon. All others are net carbon emitters.

Healthy, well-managed forests scrub the air and act as "carbon sinks" – they sequester, or remove from the atmosphere and store, more carbon than they release. California's forests sequester some 5 million metric tons of carbon every year. They could capture twice as much with the right incentives.

California's forestry infrastructure, however, has been in decline for decades. Since 1990, nearly 70 percent of the state's sawmills have gone out of business. Timber harvest on California's public forestlands is down 90 percent; it's down 60 percent on private forestlands.

The current language in SB144 is somewhat confusing. An analysis in the 3/26 edition of the Capitol Weekly, for instance, noted SB144 would force timber harvesters to "mitigate the carbon footprint of their tree cutting operations," yet harvesting trees is central to what makes the forest sector a carbon sink. The same article positioned SB144 in response to concerns about "worldwide carbon emissions from cutting and

burning of the world's forests," but California has seen increases, not decreases, in lands zoned for timber production and California's forest growth exceeds harvest by more than 150 percent.

Forest management creates optimal tree-growing conditions, which is good since fast-growing forests sequester the most carbon. Harvesting transfers the carbon stored in tree trunks to the "product pool," wood products like lumber and furniture for homes, where it stays safely for decades or centuries.

During harvest operations, small trees and branches are chipped and used to produce bio-

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energy. Mills that digitally scan logs and feature laser-guided saws often produce clean energy from sawdust, bark and wood scraps – enough to run mill operations and supply California's power grid. The more biofuel energy we generate, the less fossil fuel we need to burn for electricity and the more we reduce carbon emissions.

After harvest, native species are replanted and the cycle begins again. Healthy, fast-growing forests are perhaps the best scrubbers of greenhouse gases on the planet.

But forestry's full carbon benefits are attainable only so long as there are people working to sustain healthy forests.

Recent announcements of further mill clos-

ings affect more than 1,000 jobs in California communities already reeling from high unemployment. The economic drain of these closings will ripple through schools, county services programs and the state's budget coffers.

California forestland owners already pay unprecedented fees. Regulatory costs to practice forestry in California have increased 1,200 percent in the last 30 years and cost California forestland owners ten times what they cost similar businesses in Washington and Oregon.

It's not only forestland owners who are bearing increasing regulatory costs. California taxpayers pay twice what they did just five years ago to oversee timber harvesting even while harvesting has decreased more than 60 percent. Meanwhile, taxpayers dole out more than a billion dollars annually to fight wildfires that feast on California forestlands packed with more trees per acre than at any time in the last 150 years.

Heavier regulations or higher fees won't improve California's forest health, reduce wildfire severity or lower fighting costs. Neither will they help remove more carbon dioxide from the air, put people back to work or make California any less dependent on imported wood and energy.

Encouraging sustainable forestry and investing in our crippled forestry infrastructure will.

In its current form, SB144 could undermine the progress made by the California Climate Action Registry forest working group over the past 15 months. It ventures without clarity into new layers of oversight that could conflict with efforts by the newly formed Interagency Forestry Working Group on Climate Change and overlooks the importance of California's forestry infrastructure in carbon sequestration efforts.

The forest sector can do more to reduce California's carbon footprint. SB144 should be amended to help, not impede, efforts to achieve that goal.



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