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OPINION

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Rim fire: Disaster shows need to invest in Sierra forests and California's water supply

**By California Assemblymembers Brian Dahle and Rich Gordon
Special to the Mercury News**

The two of us have many differences. One is a Republican, the other a Democrat. One represents a rural district, the other predominately suburban communities. There is plenty we do not agree on.

But we are in total agreement on the benefits that flow from the Sierra Nevada to all of California, the most obvious of which is water. The Rim wildfire, which continues to encroach on the Yosemite National Park and now threatens the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, is just one example of the environment degradation that jeopardizes the Sierra's many resources. Additional investments are necessary to ensure water continues to be delivered throughout California and that the forests remain a state icon.

More than 60 percent of California's water supply originates in the Sierra as rain or snow. This water is captured in reservoirs and moved through pipes and canals to communities, farms and businesses. Bay Area communities are direct beneficiaries: The Sierra Nevada provides all or part of the drinking water for more than 23 million people and irrigates one-third of California's agricultural land. Sierra Nevada water also makes up half the flow of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Besides providing water, Sierra Nevada forests absorb carbon dioxide and store carbon. They filter water and slow runoff after storms, mitigating potential floods. They provide habitat for many species and recreational opportunities or a place of solace for millions of people. They are a source of wood products and jobs for Californians.

But today, the Sierra Nevada forests are in great peril and will continue to decline if we do not take action.

The Rim wildfire, the largest in Sierra history, has engulfed an area larger than San Francisco – more than 250 square miles as of Monday – and activated more than 2,800 fire personnel. It will

have lasting consequences for all of California. Thousands of home evacuations, road closures, poor air quality and increased public health risks are affecting those who live near the fires. But those who live hundreds of miles away in the Bay Area also face significant threats.

Erosion will drastically increase the amount of sediment that clogs streams and reservoirs. This creates costly maintenance problems to our water systems, delays water delivery and decreases storage capacity, which is crucial following another dry winter. Additional investment in the state's primary watershed is essential to avoid further devastation and danger to future water supplies.

In addition, mercury left behind more than 150 years ago by gold miners continues to compromise water quality of streams, eventually reaching farmland and the state's water transportation system.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency with the mission of balancing environmental and economic concerns, is working with a wide range of parties to resolve conflicts around forest management. In recent years it has benefited greatly from Proposition 84 monies, which have funded numerous restoration projects.

However, Proposition 84 dollars for the Sierra are expected to run out by 2014. Additional funding is essential for the Conservancy to continue forest thinning, meadow restoration, land conservation and mercury remediation, all necessary for the forests to thrive. Funding should derive from multiple sources, including the Cap and Trade auction initiated last fall. The steps we take to protect California's primary water supply will also reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

We will work together to ensure the needs of this region are part of the discussions addressing California's water future. Our constituents in rural northern California and the metropolitan Silicon Valley have much riding on this.

Assemblymen Rich Gordon (D-Menlo Park) and Brian Dahle (R-Bieber) wrote this for this newspaper.

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