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My turn: Investments in Sierra forests crucial for future water supply

By [Special to the Democrat](#)

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The two of us have many differences. One of us is Republican, the other a Democrat.

One represents a sprawling rural district, the other predominately comprised of suburban communities.

And to be sure, there is plenty we do not agree on.

But one area we are in total agreement is the many benefits that flow from the Sierra Nevada to all of California — the most obvious of which is water. Simply put, additional investments in the Sierra are necessary to ensure water continues to be delivered throughout California and that these forests remain a state icon.

More than 60 percent of our water supply originates from the Sierra as rain or snow. This water is captured in reservoirs and moved through pipes and canals to communities, farms and businesses throughout the state. Like much of California, communities in the Bay Area are direct beneficiaries of the Sierra Nevada. The Sierra Nevada region 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 — in many ways, the Delta begins in the Sierra.

In addition to water, Sierra Nevada forests provide many other benefits. They absorb carbon dioxide and store carbon. They filter water and slow down runoff after storms, mitigating potential floods. They provide habitat for dozens of species and offer recreational opportunities or a place of solace for millions of people. The forests also play an integral role in our state's economy as a source of wood products and jobs for Californians.

Today, the Sierra Nevada forests, and their many benefits, are in great peril and will continue to decline if we do not take action.

Streams face water quality challenges from mercury left behind more than 150 years ago by gold miners. Overgrown forests are susceptible to catastrophic fire with far-reaching consequences, especially to our water supply, as erosion from these fires will drastically increase the amount of sediment that clogs streams and reservoirs. This creates costly maintenance problems to our water systems and decreases the storage capacity.

In June, we faced conditions unlike any in recent memory. Record lows of precipitation this winter have left dry conditions on the ground. Combined with overly dense forests, this creates a potentially devastating scenario. Already, large fires in the Sierra have forced hundreds of families to evacuate their homes, and fire officials warn that this could be one of California's worst fire seasons in history. A recent fire in Colorado destroyed more than 500 homes, and of course, we all mourn the loss of the 19 brave firefighters who perished in Arizona. For those of us dealing with the complex issues surrounding the future of California's water, additional investment in the state's primary watershed is essential to avoid such tragedies here.

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, the conservancy has benefited greatly from Proposition 84 monies, which have funded numerous restoration projects throughout the Sierra.

However, designated Proposition 84 dollars for the Sierra are nearing depletion and are expected to fully run out by 2015. Additional funding is essential for the conservancy to successfully carry out activities that will bolster the Sierra, such as forest thinning, meadow restoration, land conservation and mercury remediation. These projects will be costly, but they are necessary for the Sierra forests to thrive and deliver various resources for all Californians.

Funding for the Sierra ought to derive from multiple sources, one immediate source being the Cap and Trade auction revenues initiated last fall. After all, the steps we take to protect California's primary water supply from catastrophic fire will simultaneously protect us from additional greenhouse gas emissions.

As two members of the state legislature, we will work together to ensure the needs of this region — a region that benefits all of California — are part of the discussions and the ultimate actions that address California's water future. Our constituents in rural Northern California and the metropolitan Silicon Valley should expect nothing less.

California State Assembly Republican Member Brian Dahle, R-Bieber, represents the 1st Assembly District.

Assemblyman Rich Gordon, D-Menlo Park, represents the 24th Assembly District.

Special to the Democrat