



Viewpoints: Luck, \$13 million helped save towns from Robbers fire

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We were very lucky. A change in wind direction could have caused the town of Foresthill or the city of Colfax to be evacuated from the path of the Robbers fire in [Placer County](#), with who knows what kind of damage. As it turned out, the winds and the weather cooperated and the fire in steep, densely forested terrain along the north fork of the [American River](#) was contained to less than 3,000 acres.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the firefighters from all over California. This fire had a few thousand boots on the ground – including California National Guard troops – and employed an impressive array of firefighting assets.

The other debt we owe is the \$13 million price tag for just the cost of fighting the fire – paying for the crews, food, equipment, planes and helicopters. A dozen firefighters were injured while putting their lives on the line. Fortunately, no one was killed and only five buildings were destroyed. Next time we may not be so lucky.

As expensive as this fire was, it will continue to invoice us in the future, long after it stops smoldering.

The [Sierra Nevada](#) mountain range is one of California's greatest assets. It is the place we go for our recreation, where we live and work, and it provides habitat to wildlife of all kinds. It is also where we get our water. Whether you live in Sacramento, the [Central Valley](#), the [Bay Area](#) or Southern California, most of your water starts in the Sierra.

The Delta is now the center of so much attention and debate? Yes, most of that water originates in the Sierra Nevada region's snowpack and watershed ecosystems. Unfortunately, many of these forested

watersheds are so overgrown with underbrush and a thick crown that they are ripe for a major fire of catastrophic proportions.

The five worst fire seasons ever recorded in California have occurred in the past 12 years. Today's fires burn much hotter, and the scorched earth they leave behind results in severe erosion problems – and more costs – downstream. At a time when state policymakers are grappling with long-term water needs, filling our reservoirs from the bottom up with silt and mud isn't going to help.

How did we get here? "Successful" fire suppression methods have certainly played a role along with a lack of collaboration. But there is good news: Things are changing for the better, and the solutions, while not perfect for all, come at a fraction of the costs we taxpayers are coughing up to fight forest fires.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency, is actively working with diverse stakeholders to achieve healthier forests and communities. For example, a thinning project funded by the conservancy slated to begin this fall will reduce the threat of fire for Auburn, above the American River canyon. The cost? About \$60,000. Contrast that amount with the untold millions it would cost to protect that city from a fire.

These restoration efforts also improve habitat conditions and will keep carbon stored in the trees rather than going up in smoke. And importantly, this work provides jobs and helps Sierra economies.

We have also co-sponsored, with Calaveras County Supervisor Steve Wilensky, a collaborative effort called the Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group. The group has brought together parties with diverse interests. They have found a way to work collaboratively to restore the forest, create jobs and turn forest biomass into energy and useful byproducts.

The cost of these restoration efforts is a fraction of the cost of fighting even one large fire, and no luck is involved.

The conservancy is leading an exciting effort in the Mokelumne River watershed to determine its true value to its many beneficiaries. The city of Denver has taken similar steps and has invested \$33 million "upstream."

Recently, the U.S. Forest Service announced that three groups in California successfully obtained grants for forest biomass processing. These investments will pay off down the road.

The Sierra belongs to all of us. If we take care of it, it will continue to provide world-class recreation, scenic beauty and clean drinking water. We were extremely lucky with the Robbers fire, but with the

current conditions of overgrowth in the Sierra, the deck is stacked against us. The good news is that after years of playing it "close to the vest," the parties around this table are showing their cards and realizing that through collaboration, the Sierra Nevada can be restored in a manner that makes winners of us all.

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