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## Help protect our water supply

By **Connie Best and Tom Martin**

**G**ov. Jerry Brown's task force on tree mortality has been charged with coming up with solutions that break the cycle of drought, unprecedented bark beetle infestation and wildfires that have killed millions of trees in Northern California. The task force, however, needs to look one step further. We are losing not only vital forests, but also the clean water that comes from them.

Many do not realize the relationship between forests and water. Some 65 percent of the public water supply originates in forests. Forests in watersheds act as natural water filters and storage systems for the rivers and streams that run through them. These forests help replenish them and keep them clear. This is particularly important in times of drought.

While wildfires are a natural and necessary part of forest ecology, catastrophic fires, such as the Valley and Butte fires, harm the water supply. They wipe out forested watersheds, leaving nothing to prevent runoff and debris from filling streams and rivers. As a result, the water supplies for cities in the Bay Area can become contaminated.

To protect these water supplies, we suggest that task force members look at a new report from the American Forest Foundation.

The report focuses on the ties between Western forests and the water dispensed from the faucets of 64 million people in 11 states, including California.

The report identified 34 million acres that are both at high fire risk and in important water supply watersheds. More than 13.5 million



Rich Pedroncelli / Associated Press

Inmates watch as the Butte Fire burned near San Andreas in September.

acres are on private and family land.

In California alone, private and family landowners own more land (54 percent) at risk in key watersheds than the government does.

The report emphasizes the need for Washington and Sacramento to look across ownerships to help create forests that are more resilient as well as less prone to catastrophic wildfires, especially in key watersheds.

Today, policymakers' pro-active fire prevention efforts focus on public lands. That strategy has proven to be largely ineffective in states like California, where ownership is a checkerboard.

The report shows family forest owners are motivated to act, both for themselves and for the protection of the water supply. But many don't have the financial resources to implement actions that reduce unnaturally high fuel loads, prevent insect infestations, and ultimately lower the

risk of catastrophic fire.

Therefore, Washington and Sacramento must expand forest restoration programs to incorporate family lands. This may add some costs to the budget in the short term, but the long-term savings will be far greater. While the state Department of Forestry and Fire Prevention has funding available, the need to put this money to work to aid family-forest owners is urgent.

Nothing short of more rain is going to significantly reduce the dual risks of wildfires and bug infestation in Northern California. But we can't control the weather. This represents something we can do to stop this vicious cycle of forest death.

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