Private and Family Landowners Can Help Protect Clean Water from Wildfire in the West

Over the past several years, protecting clean water in the West has grown into an urgent and pressing issue, especially with the extreme drought. Adding to this are record wildfire seasons, like the one we just experienced, where wildfires are reaching catastrophic levels, destroying the natural filtration systems in forests that help keep water clean.

Many of our policymakers have been searching for solutions to ensure that the 2016 wildfire season is not worse than 2015. But to do this, they must find ways to protect not only people and homes, but also the limited water supply.

Amid this, the American Forest Foundation has released a new report entitled, “Western Water Threatened by Wildfire: It’s Not Just a Public Lands Issue” that sheds additional light on the issue and offers three important solutions to help forest landowners.

The report shows that, contrary to popular thinking, wildfire is not just a public lands issue. In fact, 40 percent—or 13.5 million acres—of the forests and other lands in important watersheds that are at a high risk of catastrophic wildfire across the West, are actually owned by families and other private entities.

The report also found that private and family landowners want to do the right thing, noting that they are motivated to take action to reduce the threat of wildfire and help protect clean water. However, what prevents most from doing so is the high cost of implementing management actions.

These new findings can be a great tool to help garner support for woodland owner programs from your Congressional members.

In addition to the report’s factual findings, it also describes near-term solutions that policymakers should consider in order to support landowners in their wildfire prevention efforts.

First, we need Congress to fix how it pays for firefighting. The cost to fight wildfires continues to grow. As of September, the bill for the year had exceeded $1 billion.

Under the current structure, the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of the Interior are forced to fund their firefighting program at the expense of other important programs—many of which are designed to get ahead of the wildfire problem. Even with this additional funding, firefighting budgets are usually still not enough. This forces the two agencies to go back and borrow funds from these same programs to pay the firefighting bill.

To avoid this vicious cycle, Congress should treat wildfire fighting the same way it treats other disaster funding, especially for the extremely large and costly fires that need the most support.

Second, our policymakers need to find opportunities to stimulate forest restoration across boundaries that incorporate private and family lands into the mix. Authorities and programs are already in place to engage in collaborative efforts to reduce wildfire risk. But, most are implemented across public lands (federal and state), and do not often include private lands. Given the patchwork forest ownership pattern common in the West, conducting forest restoration across an entire region will help raise the resilience of the entire forest.

Finally, it is important to recognize that there will never be enough public funding available to solve the entire wildfire problem. Instead, state and federal policymakers must find ways to create new markets for wood products that can help fund the landowners’ costs of wildfire mitigation and forest restoration. Ongoing healthy forest management efforts both can be both ecological and economical.

Consider sharing these new findings and the recommendations with your state and federal policymakers to help gain support for landowners and thereby reduce wildfire risk. To view the report, visit: www.forestfoundation.org/western-water-forests-report.

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