Wildfire Damages Western Water Resources
And Everyone Is Affected

A study released by the American Forest Foundation in late October confirms what many family woodland owners already knew: Wildfire is not just a public lands issue at all. Within the West there is a high fire threat on 93 million acres of public lands. And...there are more than 52 million acres of private lands with a similar high fire threat.

Healthy forests are key to clean water. They are a natural filter and water storage system that regulates stream flow and reduces flooding. While only 31 percent of the Western region is forested, 65 percent of the region’s water supply comes from these forested lands. With fuel loads at all-time high, catastrophic wildfires are a significant threat to clean water. Add to that the persistent drought with record low snowpacks and some of the lowest reservoir levels recorded, with the record 9.1 million acres of burn to date in 2015, and water planners are expressing alarm.

How much is water worth? Whatever you have to pay to get it to your tap!

Researchers from the American Forest Foundation, aided by state forestry agencies and the U.S. Forest Service, paid particular attention to forested land in important watersheds for public water supplies. They found 21 million acres of public lands in these watersheds and 13.5 million acres of private lands. In some states, there was more risk to water on private land than public.

In surveying the landowners involved, 62 percent said fire is a top concern, but only 25 percent said they will “definitely” take action in the coming year. Why so few? 77 percent cited high costs as a barrier, and 64 percent worry about the lack of action on neighboring land. Family forest landowners are aware and motivated, but they need help.

Local units of NWOA’s affiliated state landowner associations are a logical place to initiate the needed programs. There is no better way to focus on the large number of “un-engaged” landowners than the proven “neighbor to neighbor” outreach.

We need Congress to enact overdue provisions within the Wildfire Funding Reform Act (which NWOA and 133 other associations support) this year! The federally-mandated State Forestry Action Plans provide the tools to implement action within multiple ownerships on a landscape level.

And, perhaps the greatest need—tax reforms and other incentives—must be available to stimulate financial investment in the forest products sector. If woodland owners have no place to sell their thinnings, they cannot afford to accomplish the kind of forestry needed for healthy watersheds. Sure, that could also be done with public-cost-sharing programs, but experience shows public funding is realistically available for only a small part of the need.

As this important and timely report confirms, we need new solutions, new ideas, and alternative sources of funding. As water wells and municipal water authorities run dry, as some did this summer, the time to act is now. It only gets worse, with exception of an occasional wet year.

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