Resilient Forests for a Healthy Yuba River Watershed

Background
Healthy forests are vital to a healthy watershed. Yuba Water Agency is increasingly concerned about the growing threat of wildfire due to its potentially devastating impact on water supply and water quality. Yuba Water is actively working to reduce wildfire risk, leading with innovative solutions to make the Yuba watershed one of California’s first sustainable, actively managed watersheds.

Sustainable forest management protects our communities, increases the amount of water in the river, and improves water quality by reducing sediment and debris flow. Sediment and debris removal have cost Yuba Water millions in recent years, funds that could be spent instead on prevention efforts to reduce the threat of catastrophic fire for the people of Yuba County.

North Yuba Forest Partnership
The North Yuba Forest Partnership is a diverse group of nine organizations passionate about forest health and watershed resilience. Together, the partners are working on an unprecedented scale to collaboratively plan, finance and implement forest restoration across 275,000 acres of the North Yuba River watershed.

The partnership includes Yuba Water Agency, the U.S. Forest Service, The Nature Conservancy, South Yuba River Citizens League, Camptonville Community Partnership, Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan Tribe, National Forest Foundation, Sierra County and Blue Forest Conservation.

Through ecologically-based thinning and prescribed fire, the partnership seeks to protect North Yuba communities from the threat of wildfire and restore the watershed to a healthier, more resilient state. Restoration efforts are expected to take years, if not decades to complete, with the most critical project areas targeted first. This includes at-risk communities, evacuation access routes, and treatments to areas that have the potential to stop wildfire from spreading.

Watershed Health
Sustainable forest management, in addition to reducing wildfire risk, can also improve water quality by decreasing sediment and post-fire debris flowing into rivers and reservoirs. Improved water quantity is also expected as a result of healthy watersheds, as fewer trees absorb less water, allowing that water to flow to rivers, lakes and groundwater for other beneficial uses.
The Yuba Project

In the North Yuba River watershed, crews are working on a $4.6 million effort to restore forest health across 15,000 acres in the Tahoe National Forest. The National Forest Foundation is the primary implementation partner. Forest health will be improved by thinning the overgrown forest and enhancing meadows.

Yuba Water is a funding partner for this project, through a unique financial vehicle called the Forest Resilience Bond, which raises private capital from investors to fund forest restoration with the goal of mitigating wildfire risk and promoting forest health. This model increases the pace and scale at which restoration treatments can occur, proactively mitigating the risk of catastrophic fire.

Investment comes from the Rockefeller Foundation, Gordon & Betty Moore Foundation, Calvert Impact Capital and CSAA Insurance Group. Yuba Water, the State of California, and the U.S. Forest Service have signed contracts agreeing to share the cost of reimbursing investors over time. Yuba Water has committed $1.5 million over five years for the effort.

Yuba Foothills Healthy Forest Project

A $4.5 million grant from Cal Fire benefits Yuba Water’s ongoing efforts to support healthier, more resilient forests in an area that has experienced numerous wildfires. These funds will be used for a collaborative effort that includes Yuba Water, Cal Fire, Plumas National Forest, Yuba Watershed Protection and Fire Safe Council, private landowners and local residents.

The project will support significant biomass removal treatments on 5,375 acres in the Yuba County foothills, all of which are adjacent to communities with limited resources for fire risk reduction efforts. These treatments will improve forest health and reduce the risk of a catastrophic wildfire within a project impact zone that spans more than 71,000 acres and includes an estimated 2,721 structures.

Camptonville Biomass

Yuba Water is also partnering with the Camptonville Community Partnership, investing in the development of a 3-megawatt biomass facility within the Yuba River Watershed.

The biomass plant would process forest biowaste and use it to generate clean electricity, creating a regional market for forest waste material or otherwise hazardous fuels.

Fuel for the biomass plant would come from sustainable forest management practices, like those planned for all of Yuba Water’s forest restoration projects.

This biomass plant is similar to what is planned for Camptonville.