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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Wednesday, August 16, 2017

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Ailing Northern California Watersheds Pose Risk to Reliability, Quality of State's Water Supply
New study assesses damage to sources that feed Oroville and Shasta reservoirs

San Francisco – A new study, conducted by Pacific Forest Trust, shows that half of the source watersheds that supply northern California's primary reservoirs are at risk due to impacts from climate change, management patterns and development. Findings indicate watershed function, already severely degraded, cannot be relied upon to sustain California's water needs without significant repair and maintenance.

A Risk Assessment of California's Key Source Watershed Infrastructure evaluates conditions, repair and maintenance needs for the Feather, Pit, McCloud, Upper Sacramento, and Upper Trinity River watersheds. These five sources feed the Oroville and Shasta reservoirs, which provide drinking water for over 28 million Californians and supply the large majority of the water for the State Water Project.

"Climate change has significantly elevated existing threats to forest watersheds and downstream water supplies, especially from fire, drought, pest infestations and disease," said Malcolm North, Research Forest Ecologist with the U.S. Forest Service Pacific Southwest Research Station. "Restoring forests and managing them to be more resilient is key to protecting water quality and security."

Last year, Governor Jerry Brown signed legislation recognizing watersheds as a critical component of California's water infrastructure, just like the state's dams, canals and levees. AB 2480 established that the maintenance and repair of source watersheds is eligible for the same forms of financing as other water collection and treatment infrastructure, calling out these source watersheds for their specific importance.

"Last year, I authored AB 2480 to recognize the importance of source watersheds to California's water infrastructure system," said Assembly member Richard Bloom (D-Santa Monica). "I am pleased to see Pacific Forest Trust build on this legislation with a new Water Infrastructure Risk Assessment that will help the state prioritize its natural infrastructure and support watershed restoration."

Chief Ken Pimlott, CAL FIRE director and California's state forester concurred, saying, "The strong connection between healthy forests and a clean, reliable water source underscores the need for swift and aggressive actions to mitigate threats to our forests."

The study demonstrates how proven tools of restoration and protection of forested watersheds reduce flood events and intensity, increase water supply and storage, facilitate better timing of water releases and improve water quality. However, it highlights, watershed restoration thus far has been very limited and fragmented, leaving the broader landscape at significant risk.

"This assessment lays out the problems plaguing these water sources and what we need to do to fix them." said Laurie Wayburn, President of Pacific Forest Trust. "It is the foundation of a comprehensive roadmap for what needs to be done with natural infrastructure in order to protect the state's water security."