

CAL MATTERS

Commentary
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Watershed restoration is key to a climate-smart future



The Sacramento River headwaters region. Image via Pacific Forest Trust

IN SUMMARY

Investing in the Sacramento River headwaters region could secure the state's water supply for decades.



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California is in a megadrought, with its key reservoirs falling to their lowest points in history. Wildfire season is already here, and officials are bracing for yet another catastrophic year. Meanwhile, rural communities remain in desperate need of viable, sustainable economic futures. One climate-smart solution that addresses all these needs is watershed restoration.

As California lawmakers and state agencies figure out how to implement the state budget bill, they must include major investments to restore the natural infrastructure we rely on for our water, oxygen, and climate mitigation: forested watersheds.

In a state spanning over 100 million acres, determining where and how to invest in restoring that natural infrastructure in a time of climate change is a challenge. The scope at hand requires us to plan and act for the long term and large scale, ensuring that the benefits of the investment will persist despite climate change. We need to scale up and think bigger — to cover an entire watershed, not just pieces of it.

The good news is that we now have [climate modeling data](#) that points to a smart place to start: the Sacramento River headwaters region, a 7 million-acre set of watersheds and the surrounding 3 million-acre buffer that is the heart of our water supply.

Climate researchers studied the region using multiple scenarios and found that it provides highly favorable conditions to secure the state's water supply and protect California's outstanding biodiversity for at least the next 100 years. It also is at the heart of the state's most productive forests, and is a key carbon storage area.

In other words, this is a part of the state where investments in our natural water infrastructure would have significant and enduring effects on water supply, biodiversity, climate and jobs.

The Sacramento River headwaters provide the [vast majority of water used in the state](#), supplying drinking water for residents and agriculture all the way down to Southern California. Restoring forests, meadows and wetlands in this region helps increase overall water storage, improving the watershed's ability to hold more water and retain it longer in hot, dry summers.

Water infrastructure investment based on smart and thoughtful forest management and conservation practices in the region would reduce the intensity of wildfires, too. Fewer catastrophic wildfires means we could save lives and properties and keep air quality at healthier levels.

Finally, restoring one of the most powerful carbon sinks in California would help us [reach carbon neutrality by 2045](#).

It's going to take human labor to help the natural infrastructure do all this work for us. Watershed restoration would support thousands of jobs in forestry, ecosystem restoration, fire management, road upgrades and other sectors, bringing in dollars that would multiply in benefits as they circulate in a region with some of the [highest unemployment rates](#) and [greatest income inequality](#) in California.

With our rural economy in challenging straits, a drought emergency in large swaths of the state, ever-growing risk of wildfires, and the climate crisis affecting frontline communities harder than ever, California is facing a quadruple threat. Investing in our natural water infrastructure meaningfully addresses every one of these challenges.

Gov. Gavin Newsom has shown the will to do this, with his executive order to [protect 30 percent of the state's land by 2030](#). And with this year's historic budget surplus, California has the means to make progress on climate-smart solutions. The Sacramento River headwaters region is a priority place to start. To learn more about this and urge the governor and legislative leaders to act, click [here](#).