The Cost of Forest Management

Forest management is complex and costly work, but it is crucial for the long-term protection of the Sierra Nevada water supply. Depending on the location and type of treatment, the costs can range from $1,000 to $5,000 per acre. Forest health projects in the Middle Fork American River watershed have been funded through State and Federal grants, private funding, and revenue generated from PCWA's Middle Fork Hydroelectric Project. Revenues from PCWA's Middle Fork Project have also contributed to a fuels management grant program which has provided $1.7 million for community protection projects in the Auburn and Foresthill areas.

Thank You to Our Partners

US Forest Service

Placer County Water Agency

American River Conservancy

County of Placer

The Nature Conservancy

UC Merced Sierra Nevada Research Institute

Sierra Nevada Conservancy

Learn More

To learn more about PCWA's forest health initiatives and ongoing projects, visit pcwa.net.

PCWA

Placer County Water Agency (PCWA)
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PCWA

Our Water Supplies Depend on Healthy Forests

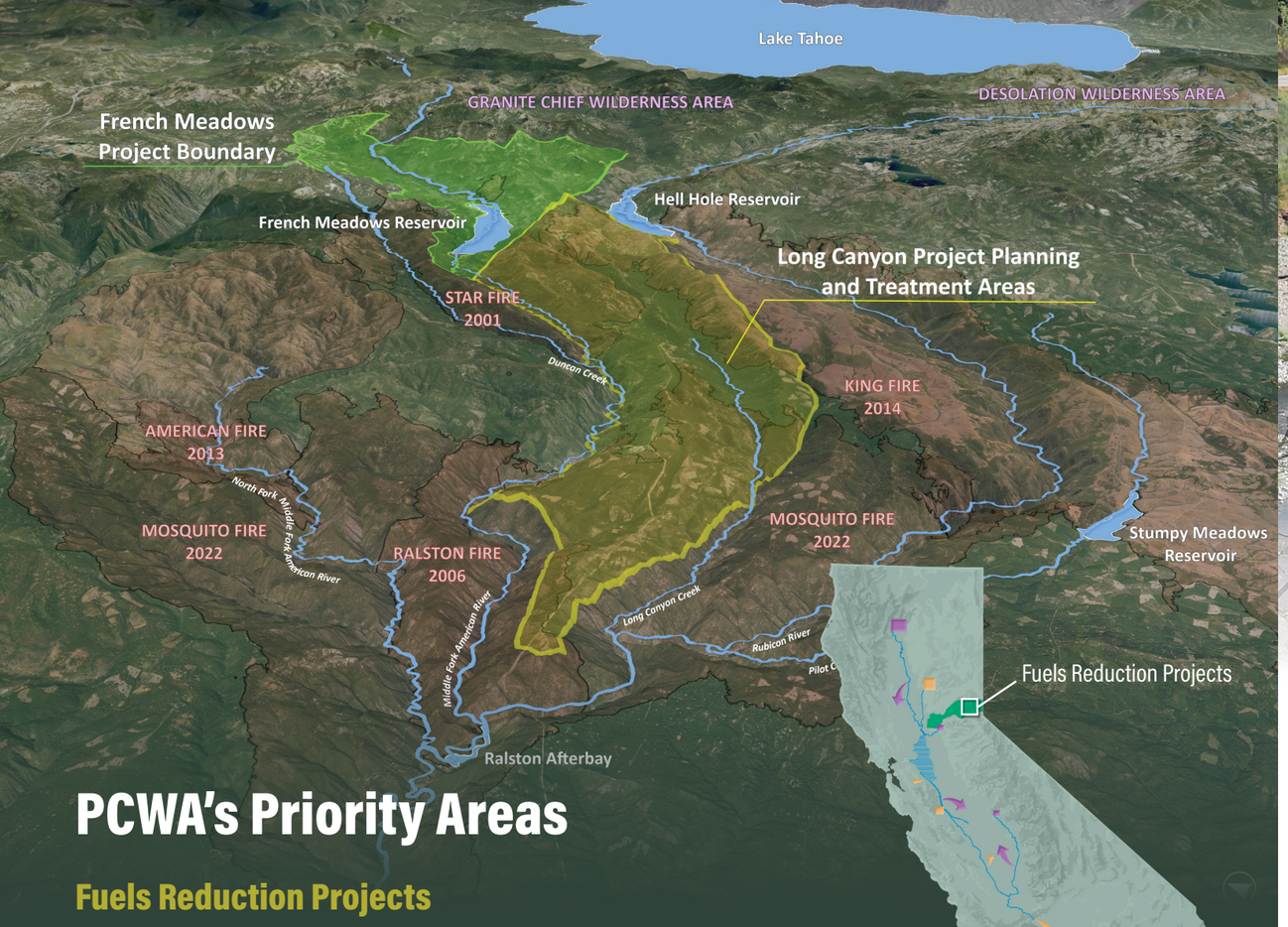
Forests in the Sierra Nevada are the foundation of Placer County's water supply. The snow and rain that falls on these forests, flow into reservoirs and aquifers that provide water for 2 million residents in the Sacramento region and beyond. These forests also sustain hydropower, agriculture, recreation, and habitat for sensitive or threatened species such as the California red-legged frog, the northern goshawk, and the California spotted owl.

However, decades of fire suppression, overgrown forests, and climate change have made these critical headwaters more vulnerable to catastrophic wildfires, drought, and pests. High-intensity wildfires damage soil, reduce water quality, and clog reservoirs with sediment, costing millions in cleanup. The King Fire in 2014 burned 97,000 acres and was a wake-up call for Placer County Water Agency (PCWA) to take action.

PCWA's forest health program aims to reduce wildfire risk, improve watershed health, and protect biodiversity. This work protects investments in our water infrastructure, maintains reliable water supplies, and supports the region's broader environmental stewardship goals.

Partnerships and Collaboration

Successful forest management requires strong partnerships. Most of the headwater forests that supply PCWA's water are on federally managed lands. The U.S. Forest Service is PCWA's primary partner in forest restoration efforts, with collaboration extending to local, state, and nonprofit organizations. Through master stewardship agreements, PCWA, the Forest Service, and other partners pool resources, expertise, and project management skills, achieving shared goals more efficiently and effectively than can be done alone.



PCWA's Priority Areas

Fuels Reduction Projects

Fuels reduction is a cornerstone of PCWA's efforts to protect the watershed and its water supplies. By removing vegetation that fuels wildfires through thinning smaller trees, clearing underbrush, and conducting prescribed burns, these projects lower wildfire intensity and speed forest recovery.

French Meadows

The French Meadows Forest Restoration Project protects critical water storage infrastructure and water supplies in the Middle Fork of the American River watershed. This public-private partnership led by PCWA, the U.S. Forest Service, the County of Placer, and others is protecting 28,800 acres near the French Meadows Reservoir through thinning, prescribed burns, and planned biomass utilization. Now through its sixth season in 2024, the project has completed 80% of the mechanical work with approx. 9,000 acres treated. Future project goals include maintenance of the areas previously treated with a strong focus on prescribed burning.

Long Canyon Creek

PCWA, the U.S. Forest Service, and Eldorado National Forest have agreed to collaborate on the Long Canyon Watershed Protection Project, which will restore 16,500 acres in the Long Canyon Creek watershed. Planning is underway to conduct tree thinning, prescribed burns, and reforestation. Fieldwork and environmental documentation are set to begin in 2025, with implementation starting as early as 2026. This project will protect a key tributary to the Rubicon River, an essential PCWA water supply.

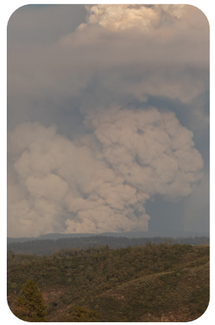
Severe Wildfires Impact Water Quality

After a wildfire, rain can wash ash, sediment, and debris into rivers and reservoirs, reducing water quality and affecting supply.

Tackling Challenges and Leading Solutions

Managing Biomass

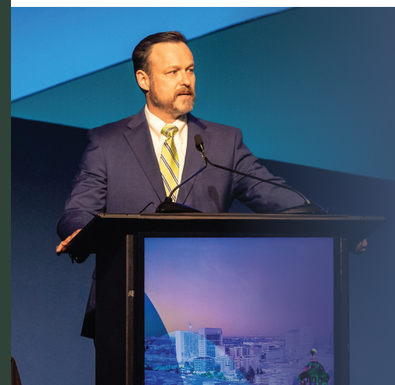
Effectively managing forest biomass is essential for wildfire mitigation and forest restoration, yet limited markets and infrastructure for small trees and brush pose significant challenges. To tackle these issues, PCWA is participating in the California Forest Residual Aggregation Market Enhancement (Cal FRAME) Pilot Program, working with local and state agencies to stabilize biomass supply chains and identify solutions to existing barriers. PCWA is also exploring the development of a small-scale biomass energy facility near the agency's future Ophir Water Treatment Plant. This facility would use clean, controlled burning to convert woody debris from restoration projects into electricity for both the plant and the electric grid, turning a wildfire risk into a renewable energy resource.



Protecting Air Quality

Severe wildfires release massive amounts of smoke containing harmful pollutants like particulate matter, carbon monoxide, and volatile organic compounds. These pollutants degrade air quality over vast areas, posing serious health risks, particularly for those with respiratory conditions.

PCWA's forest management efforts prioritize controlled burns to prevent mega-fires and protect air quality. Unlike wildfires, controlled burns are carefully planned and conducted under optimal weather conditions to minimize smoke impacts. These low-intensity burns reduce the fuel load, lower wildfire risk, and produce less smoke. In addition, they promote forest health, offering long-term benefits for air quality and ecosystem vitality.



PCWA's Leadership in Wildfire Resilience

PCWA General Manager Andy Fecko was appointed to serve on the Federal Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission, contributing to the commission's September 2023 report. The report emphasizes the importance of prescribed burns, improved pre-fire planning, and increased funding for water agencies managing forested watersheds.