



Fact Sheet: Problems of Loss

California's richly diverse forests provide immense public benefits — from wood supplies to water flows, from recreation to habitat for hosts of native species. Yet the burgeoning, urbanized population of the state and its elected representatives are often unaware of their dependency on forest goods and services.

While the public assumes California's forests are “evergreen and everlasting,” our conifer and oak woodland forests increasingly are being converted to ranchettes, retirement homes, resorts, vineyards and other developed uses at an accelerating pace. Much that we love about California is at danger of being lost with them.

Accelerating Pace of Forests Lost to Development

According to the most recent National Resource Inventory produced by the Natural Resource Conservation Service, California's forests lost 20,000 acres a year to development during the five year period from 1992 to 1997. This is almost *three* times as much as only ten years earlier. The California Dept. of Forestry and Fire Protection's Forest and Range Assessment Program (FRAP) estimates that the state is currently losing at least 35,000 acres annually - an area larger than San Francisco chopped up largely for housing each year.

This is just the tip of the iceberg: Every forested county has a development “time bomb” of hundreds of small forested parcels created in subdivisions from the 1970s and 1980s that have appeared to open and “wild” but are now being built out. And demand is outpacing supply, creating pressures for new parcels.

Outright Loss + More Small Parcels = Big Impacts on Surrounding Forests

Parcelization, intensification of development in rural areas, and increasing population densities have been shown to compromise the functionality of not only the smaller forest tracts, but that of the adjacent forestlands as well, reducing their capacity to support wildlife, regulate water supplies, and yield wood products. Properties in this fragmented forest are also at greater risk of fire and the invasion of exotic plant species.

In other words, while the impact of total loss may appear limited to the specific property that is developed, its impact is actually magnified and reverberates out into the forest landscape. A 2002 study of projected development impacts in El Dorado County by FRAP showed that loss of 4 percent of natural lands impaired the ecological functions of 40 percent of the total area as the forest fabric become “moth-eaten” and fragmented by patches of building.

How Much More Will Be Lost?

With this potential trajectory of loss, it is difficult to predict how far and how fast development will carve up the forest landscape and impair critical forest values. At risk are not only the oak woodlands and mixed forests rising from coastal and inland valleys, but the blazingly hot market for real estate has made significant inroads in the heart of the commercial timber regions. Development is driving off the major freeways and following every highway to the coast, up into the mountains, and along every gorgeous river and lakefront. Southern Mendocino County, Humboldt County near Eureka, the foothills of Shasta County, and “destination locations” throughout the Sierra and Klamath — Cascade regions are attracting low density rural residential and recreational development.

FRAP estimates that at least 1.2 million acres of forests could be developed in the next 35 years if historic conversion trends continue. In addition, the habitat value, ecological functions and timber productivity of many more millions of adjacent forest acres could well be crippled by such fragmentation.

The Interplay of Public and Private Forestlands

Nearly 60 percent of California’s forests are in public ownership. It is important, therefore, to better understand the interplay between public and private ownerships across the landscape. Forest health, wildlife habitat and water are interwoven regardless of political boundaries. Management of public lands affects private lands. The reverse is true as well, sometimes with perverse affect. Both on the coast and in the mountains, privately- owned conifer forests are subject to greater development pressures near parks and public recreation areas than elsewhere. Conversion of such private forestland undermines the very viability of the protected public area by creating a different land use on the boundary.

Dynamic Drivers of Forest Loss

The drivers to this spreading crisis of loss include a suite of interrelated trends: population growth, huge numbers of retirees, sprawling development patterns, complex and expensive regulatory requirements for timber harvests, global competition in the forest products industry, increasing turnover in industrial and non-industrial forest ownerships, and rising financial returns from alternative uses — notably real estate.

As a high cost timber producer, California is vulnerable to the economic impact of a globalized industry and a world awash in inexpensive wood fiber. Even excellent forest stewards are facing competitive pressures, as the provision of ecosystem services — such as carbon stores, clean water flows or habitat values — have yet to bring them much financial benefit. Some owners are divesting or have left the state. Mills have consolidated or closed due to reduced wood supplies from public lands and the drive for greater efficiency among remaining producers. Opportunities for private forests to economically sustain themselves are narrowing. Landowners are increasingly wondering how their forests can pay for themselves. In this context, cashing in on the increasing of forest land as real estate becomes more attractive.

When Forests are Lost Everyone Loses

These vulnerable forests nourish all Californians, directly and indirectly. Whether one lives in a forested community or urban center, much of the wood you use, the air you breathe, the water you drink, the climate we enjoy, the creatures you love, and the inspiration you draw is dependent on maintaining our forest landscapes in the face of these complex threats.

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