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Building Community to Support Healthy Forests

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California's mountainous headwater forests are in crisis, and an all-hands-on-deck approach is needed to improve their health. A combination of factors—dense forests with too many small trees, abundant ground fuels, and large patches of dead trees—leaves them increasingly vulnerable to severe wildfire. The best way to address the impacts of tree mortality and improve forest health is with **strategic use of fire and mechanical thinning**.

A big challenge to increasing the pace and scale of forest management is the patchwork nature of California's headwaters. Implementing forest management is particularly challenging for many people who own family forests (parcels less than 5,000 acres in size), which make up about a

quarter of the Sierra Nevada headwater forests. The high cost of forestry work on these small land holdings is a major barrier for many owners.

Resource conservation districts (RCDs) are one of several locally governed entities that can play an important role in helping landowners improve forest health. RCDs are authorized by the state to perform a variety of resource and land management functions, including forest stewardship, fuels management, and watershed planning and management. There are about 20 RCDs covering most of the Sierra Nevada headwater region. RCDs are well versed in local resource management issues and often are more trusted by local landowners than state or federal agencies.

RCDs can organize forest management projects across multiple private properties. For example, in 2017 the Placer County RCD used grant funding to pay for dead tree removal on family-owned forest properties in the rural community of Foresthill—an area that was hit hard by tree loss caused by drought and pests. RCDs could also assist groups of forest owners in identifying common management needs and pooling private resources to pay for on-going management.

RCDs are well placed to facilitate relationships between forest owners and other potential partners in management projects. For example, the Sierra RCD in Fresno County is implementing a district-wide carbon management program that makes use of dead trees from the massive tree die-off. With the help of the California Association of Resource Conservation Districts and the Governor's Office of Planning and Research, the Sierra RCD is working with CAL FIRE and the US Forest Service to process these dead trees into a charcoal-like product called "biochar," which can be used to increase soil health on nearby agricultural lands in the Central Valley.

Steve Haze, the district manager of the Sierra RCD, says these kinds of strategic partnerships can help "carve out a niche and add value to the effort" of removing large numbers of dead trees. Many RCDs are in a unique position to find overlapping interests and turn them into projects with multiple benefits in their districts.

While many RCDs may be keen to take on new roles and responsibilities to meet their local forest management needs, establishing long-term funding to support these efforts is a major challenge. Less than 15 of the state's 99 RCDs have adequate funding through local property taxes; the rest are supported by less-stable sources such as grants or appropriations from county governments. Finding durable funding sources for headwater RCDs could help spur long-term forest management work that would bring benefits to entire watersheds.

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Read *Improving the Health of California's Headwater Forests* (PPIC, 2017)

Read *California's Water: Protecting Headwaters* (from the *California's Water* briefing kit)

Visit the PPIC Water Policy Center's [drought resource page](#)

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