Statement of Tom Partin, President
American Forest Resource Council

Before the

Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives

Legislative Hearing on H.R. 3188
October 3, 2013

The Impact of Catastrophic Wildfires on Watersheds, such as the Rim Fire, Stanislaus National Forest

The Forest Service is hamstrung nationwide with the aftermath of catastrophic wildfire. Particularly in the west and specifically in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California, the number, size and intensity of wildfires are increasing. Just in the last 25 years, the high severity burned acres has increased from 21% to 33% of total acres burned. The fire behavior, particularly over the past year, has reached a new level. The Rim Fire expanded 35,000 acres on Day 4 and then an additional 50,000 acres on Day 5 and was burning in every direction throwing embers up to a mile. There's never been anything like it and it's, in large part, because of the ever-increasing tree density on the national forests coupled with long, dry fire seasons. Today, in the California Region on the national forests, productive forestlands have 266 trees/acre on a landscape that can only support about 40-100 trees/acre. The Forest Service mechanical thinning and fuels reduction program only removes 7% of annual growth. The Forests are getting denser and denser and denser. It's no surprise that we are seeing fire behavior like never before.

Following a catastrophic wildfire, the Forest Service has short term burned area emergency rehabilitation (BAER) authority that is by definition part of the wildfire "emergency". These short term activities (water barring dozer lines, rehabilitating other suppression-related activities on the landscape, putting hay bales across streams to try to reduce the sediment transport so that drainages don't gully over the winter months and next spring, . . .) are very limited in scope.

The longer term work of restoring the denuded watersheds is left to the Forest Service to figure out how to accomplish using normal NEPA procedures, ESA processes, and paying for it out of their normal appropriations (there is no special money for longer term watershed restoration).

The priorities of the Rim Fire are:

1) Roadside hazard tree removal on about 400 miles of Forest Service system road inside the burn perimeter. This work is needed for public and administrative safety and to keep the road system open to perform the rehab and restoration work. If the hazard trees are

not removed, there will be literally thousands of trees that fall across the roads during the coming winter and close the roads.

2) Because of the complexity of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)/Endangered Species Act (ESA) processes and procedures, it generally takes the Forest Service, California Region about 10-12 months to complete an Environmental Impact Statement and Decision on what actions to take to maintain the integrity of the road system and restore the denuded watersheds.

3) Twelve months from now, brush will have already sprouted and the moderate-high severity burned acres on what was productive forest land will be well on their way to type converting to brushfields. If no salvage, site preparation and planting of seedlings occur within 12-20 months on these lands, they will be brushfields for many, many decades to come (likely until the next wildfire burns the same acres again). Over the next 5-8 years, standing dead trees will rot off and fall over onto brush that could be 5-10' high or higher.

4) The opportunity to save most of the existing road system is rapidly diminishing as winter approaches. Forest Service models predict that stream runoff could be 4 ½ times greater than normal and the runoff will be mud and debris. None of the existing culverts in the road system were designed for these types of events. There's a high probability that many culverts will plug, pond and blowout sending thousands of cubic yards of dirt down the stream channels and closing the roads for a long time to come. Closed roads mean no access to perform rehabilitation or restoration activities, even if planned and NEPA-cleared.

   Much of the existing road system has inside ditches; in just 2 weeks during the fire, dry ravel off the cut banks already filled miles of these ditches. On the fill slopes following the fire, dry ravel is eroding the fill slopes and exposing the pavement and crushed aggregate base on the mainline roads.

   These are just indicators of a catastrophe that is likely to happen during rain events this winter.

   The importance of rapid restoration of the denuded watersheds cannot be overstated. Activities begin with salvaging merchantable dead trees that will make lumber. The revenue from these trees generally can support cutting and piling of small trees and brush to help prepare the productive forest lands for planting of seedlings.

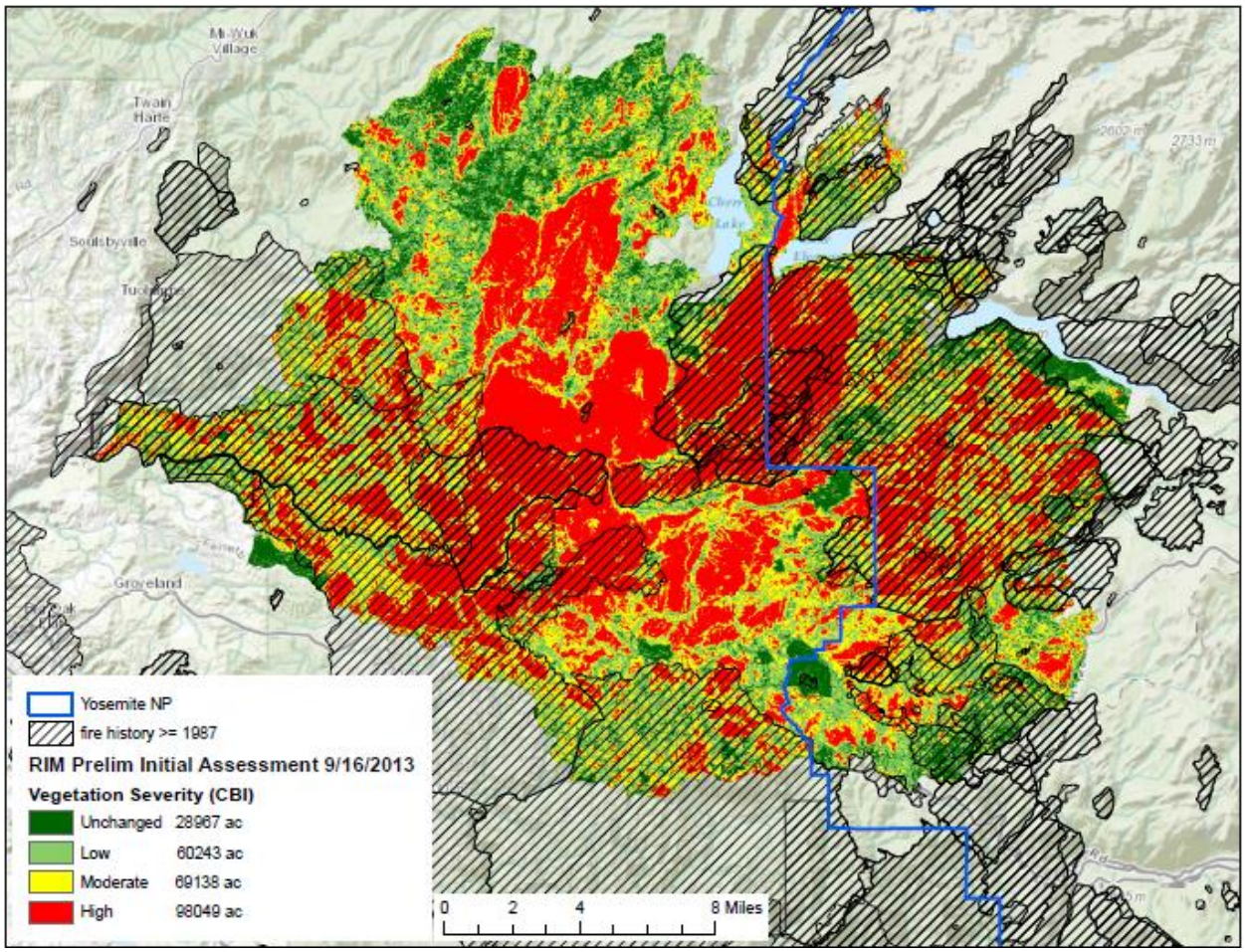
   Without rapid deployment of the salvage activity, the brush will quickly sprout and totally occupy the growing space. Replacing the brush with tree seedlings that will survive is an expensive process. Further, rapid salvage is necessary because the value of the merchantable trees rapidly declines from beetles, wood borers, and other insects. As the value declines, the opportunity for revenue from the salvage operation to pay for preparing the site for tree planting is lost.

Reforestation on acreage the Forest Service deems important to watershed restoration has to occur within 12-20 months. This will enhance the opportunity to return the watershed to a "forest" rather than a brush field.

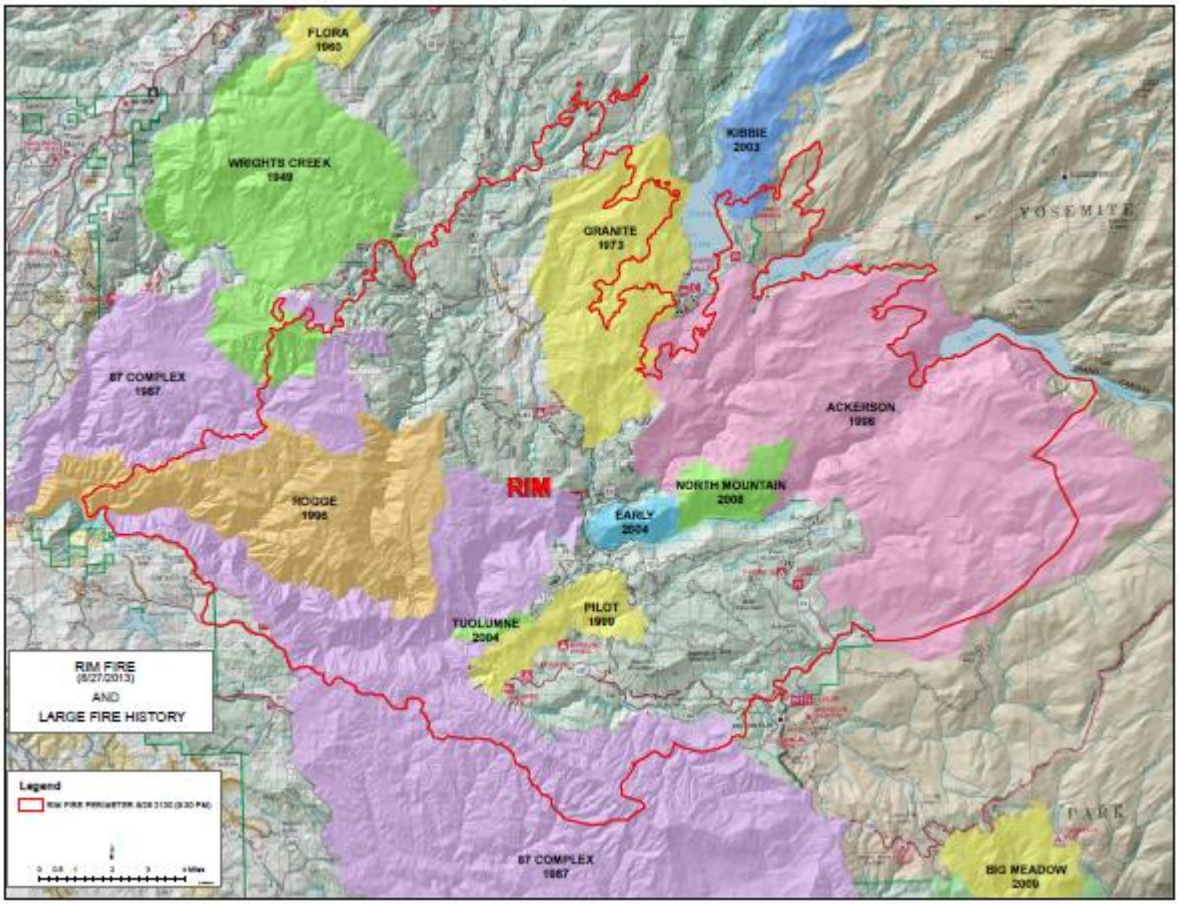
Enclosures

1) Rim Fire Vegetation Burn Severity Map
2) Assorted Pictures along the Cottonwood and Cherry Oil Roads on the Stanislaus Natl. Forest within the Rim Fire burn perimeter

The Rim Fire, Stanislaus National Forest, Vegetation Burn Severity Map (Sept. 26, 2013)



Stanislaus National Forest Fire History Map



Pictures Taken along the Cottonwood Road within the Burn Perimeter of the Rim Fire, Stanislaus Natl. Forest – Pictures taken Sept. 26, 2013

Following Pictures are along the Cherry Oil Road within the Rim Fire Burn Perimeter, Stanislaus National Forest – Pictures taken September 26, 2013