



OPINION

California nature needs investments on par with green energy and transit



BY **LAURIE WAYBURN** POSTED 01.31.2024

OPINION – While there’s no quick fix for the climate crisis, there is [now solid scientific consensus](https://www.science.org/content/article/forests-could-suck-226-gigatons-carbon-if-restored-and-protected-study-argues) (<https://www.science.org/content/article/forests-could-suck-226-gigatons-carbon-if-restored-and-protected-study-argues>) that restoring the world’s forests is the fastest and most efficient way to capture enough carbon to meet the Paris Climate Accord goals by 2030. Last month’s UN climate summit in Dubai marked a crucial shift, with forests, wetlands, and other nature-based climate solutions finally [getting the attention](https://www.carbonbrief.org/cop28-key-outcomes-for-food-forests-land-and-nature-at-the-un-climate-talks-in-dubai/) (<https://www.carbonbrief.org/cop28-key-outcomes-for-food-forests-land-and-nature-at-the-un-climate-talks-in-dubai/>) they deserve. And closer to home, California has the potential to lead the way in setting a global blueprint for implementing this overlooked part of the climate agenda.

A [state-convened expert committee](https://resources.ca.gov/Initiatives/Expanding-Nature-Based-Solutions) (<https://resources.ca.gov/Initiatives/Expanding-Nature-Based-Solutions>) has proposed a first-in-the-nation effort to establish targets for carbon pollution reduction from California’s natural and working lands. Estimating that 400 million tons of carbon reduction can be

achieved from these sectors in the very near term, the committee's report calls on the Newsom administration and legislators to invest as much in nature-based climate solutions as it has in clean energy and transportation. By making nature an equally funded ally in the fight against climate change, the state will reap benefits beyond carbon pollution reduction—from the prevention of catastrophic wildfires and floods to the protection of biodiversity.

Transitioning to clean energy and transportation is essential. That is why California has invested some \$10 billion in transportation alone over the past several years. Realistically, however, it will only get us part of the way to meet our goals and avoid climate change's most severe impacts. And in the short term, these efforts will actually result in more emissions, as a result of factors such as the manufacturing of batteries for electric cars.

Compared to longer-term initiatives, the natural and working lands sector provides more immediate emissions reductions, bringing us closer to our climate goals by 2030 and 2050 with minimal economic disruption. The committee's report (https://resources.ca.gov/-/media/CNRA-Website/Files/Initiatives/Expanding-Nature-Based-Solutions/1757_EAC_Recommendations_Implementation_Targets_for_NWL.pdf) proposes a \$10 billion investment over five years in solutions that support practical, proven, and lasting changes in how we manage our forests, wetlands, and other lands. Especially with our tight budget outlook (<https://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/capitol-alert/article284045783.html>), these cost-effective investments can make our tax dollars go even further.

The committee recommends that California replicate the same type of public-private approaches used for the transition to electric vehicles, clean energy, and climate-smart buildings, including tax credits and other public funding subsidies. Especially important are tools like conservation easements on natural and working lands, which pay landowners to change their management to broadly favor beneficial climate outcomes. The Committee specifically did not recommend using carbon offsets, which are solely a business-to-business transaction and limited in their impact.

In the forest sector alone, such working forest conservation easements (<https://www.pacificforest.org/working-forest-conservation-easements/>) that guide forest management to attain older, more natural conditions on a fraction of privately owned forests could achieve at least 150-300 million tons of CO₂ emissions reductions in 10 years—more than what the state estimates will be gained through electrification in the transportation sector overall.

Forests managed for climate also reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires. Over the last five years, wildfires in California have caused at least \$22 billion in property damage. Managing forests to be older and more natural not only enhances their resilience and fire resistance but also enables them to withstand various climate stressors, including drought. Additionally, this type of management mitigates the severity

of floods and droughts by restoring and maintaining forest watersheds, which constitute the primary source of California’s water supply for agriculture, drinking, and other purposes. This is also the least expensive way to increase water supply and security.

Beyond carbon sequestration, nature-based climate solutions offer tangible benefits: restoring wetlands helps mitigate the impact of sea level rise; expanding urban green spaces helps reduce heat and environment hazards for low-income and frontline neighborhoods; increasing organic agriculture and integrating natural border plantings in crop fields increases worker health—and they all help create well-paying skills-based jobs.

Under Governor Newsom’s leadership, California has made great strides in fighting climate change in the transportation and energy sectors, setting a model for the world. But nature-based solutions are an essential piece that has been missing from the climate solution puzzle. It offers the most promising approach to tackling the climate crisis and deserves similar financing.

A 2024 budget with major investments in these nature-based solutions will help California get out of the woods and reach a more climate-friendly future.

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