

April 22, 2004

Earth Day

Economic future depends on healthy environment

As a fourth-generation Californian, I believe that the choice between meeting the needs of the environment and the requirements of the economy is clear: California's economic future depends on the quality of our environment.

But for decades, Californians have battled over the issue of jobs versus environment. Many of us have long maintained that the solution to this problem is to be found through collaboration rather than confrontation. Jobs bring revenue to the state, and revenue allows us to do the right things for the environment. With California leading the way, conservation in the 21st century will prove that we can have both.

Although we must clear the path to economic recovery and pull California out of its fiscal crisis, our unsurpassed environmental standards cannot be sacrificed, nor our natural legacy degraded. We expect California's population to increase by 12 million -- 600,000 a year -- over the next two decades, potentially turning more timberland into subdivisions. Saving our most-threatened landscapes and habitat is essential to preserving California's quality of life.

But in moving forward, we must be practical and responsible in our approach if we are to be successful. From energy conservation to forest-fire prevention, the choices we make today concerning the environment directly impact tomorrow's economy. Perhaps now more than ever, we must develop creative solutions that integrate environmental and economic objectives.

California's forest systems protect our air and water quality, preserve our wildlife habitat and provide high-quality recreational opportunities. Our forests are also working landscapes that support local economies and define a way of life for many Californians.

Yet as more and more forestland goes up for sale across the state, the threat of fragmentation and development grows. Because of a downturn in the timber economy, much of the large timberland in California's North Coast faces possible conversion to vineyards and residential estates. This fragmentation would further damage the economic viability of the timber industry and harm the habitats that have survived because of the forests' large-scale linkages connecting varied terrains and climatic conditions.

Given decreased state and federal funding for land acquisition, it is critical that state agencies, conservation organizations, timberland owners and local communities develop balanced solutions that result in healthy forests.

In California today, imagination and innovation prove that we can manage our resources to balance the needs of

the environment and the economy. Creative private/public partnership opportunities help acquire property, promote preservation and allow innovative approaches like sustainable forestry to meet the needs of the environment and the local economy.

For example, in February, the state Coastal Conservancy joined the Conservation Fund and the Nature Conservancy, two nonprofit land conservation groups, in announcing a new sustainable forestry project that is truly a "win-win" to protect our environment and improve our economy. A model for the nation, the partnership resulted in the acquisition and permanent protection of 24,000 acres of forestland in the heart of Mendocino County, where coastal redwood and Douglas fir forests that have been harvested commercially over the last century dominate. These lands and watersheds are the lifeblood of California's North Coast, providing habitat for endangered species and supporting a growing eco-tourism industry.

While safeguarding a significant portion of the Garcia River watershed, the project established the state's first large-scale working forest owned and operated by a nonprofit conservation group -- the Conservation Fund, which has managed forestland conservation projects and protected more than 3.5 million acres across the country since 1985.

Creating such working forests will protect and restore this Northern California watershed's most valuable natural resources and provide economic benefits, including jobs for employees and contractors working to harvest, transport and process forest products. By bringing balance to the management of the Garcia River Forest, it will continue to provide refuge for the now-endangered coho salmon.

In the search for ways to protect California's natural, historical and cultural resources, projects such as the Garcia River Forest provide a fresh approach to conservation that leverages resources, using a blend of public and private financing, without putting undue management burdens on the state. This collaborative effort demonstrates the kind of creative, balanced, partnership-driven approach we can all support. It also serves as a catalyst to attract funding from individual donors, local land trusts, park districts, foundations and, of course, state and federal agencies. These successful partnerships can save California's natural treasures and help the state's economic recovery -- while leaving a legacy of land and water for generations to come.

Mike Chrisman is secretary of the California Resources Agency.