

# Rim fire damage to environment, property could hit \$1.8 billion



As the Rim fire burns about 3 miles east of Tuolumne City in August, a U.S. Forest Service hot shot crew sets up camp. The fire burned until late October. (Don Bartletti / Los Angeles Times)

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**A** recent study commissioned by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission estimates that damages from the Rim fire on the natural environment and to property value could total between about \$250 million and \$1.8 billion.

The preliminary assessment released last month places dollar amounts on losses in “environmental benefits,” carbon storage and the asset value of property near where the fire burned.

Researchers from Earth Economics found that between \$100 million and \$736 million was lost in environmental benefits, between \$102 million and \$797 million was lost in carbon storage, and fire-related private property value loss ranges from \$49.7 million to \$265 million.

David Batker, executive director of Earth Economics, said researchers couldn’t or didn’t estimate some “values” from the ecosystem such as a fire’s impact on the water supply or the loss of health due to air quality damage. He added that the results are based on satellite data taken when the fire was only 84%

contained.

As a result, he said the estimates were “very, very conservative.”

“The actual damage will be larger,” he said. “No doubt about it.”

The 410-square-mile fire — the state's third largest on record — was sparked Aug. 17 by a hunter's illegal campfire in the Stanislaus National Forest. It scorched swaths of forest, burning into the northwest part of Yosemite before it was fully contained in late October.

Experts at the time said the ecological effects of the blaze would probably **last for decades**, as massive trees were wiped out and habitats of **rare species** were severely altered. Officials have since debated the best way to handle the **largest recovery effort** the Sierra Nevada has seen.

President **Obama** signed a disaster declaration earlier this month for the state of California, making federal funds available for recovery efforts related to the **Rim fire**. The Earth Economics report was included in Gov. Jerry Brown's request for the disaster declaration.

On Friday, Alison Anja Kastama, a spokeswoman for the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, said its inclusion “supports the recognition of natural capital values.”

“By assessing the impacts of the Rim fire, this report highlights the greater dollar value we can assign to our natural lands, which are a critical portion of our water system,” she said.

Batker said that federal agencies such as the Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Forest Service must now conduct cost-benefit analysis before embarking on projects. Spending a few million dollars on tree-thinning in the Stanislaus National Forest, he said, may appear more appetizing when the costs of fire damage to the environment are better known.

“There is a sea change right now for federal agencies,” he said. “This is just the tip of the iceberg.”

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