We should have known better.

But we failed to learn the lessons of the very history that defines our area. We should have learned about boom and bust from the Gold Rush. And we should have learned about stewardship from our native Mi-wuk people, who have lived on this land for thousands of years.

But we didn't. Instead, we just kept doing boom and bust over and over. After the gold was gone, we shifted to logging, and then we looked to real estate development. None of it was sustainable.

Our area was filled with sawmills in the building boom after the Second World War. Now they're all gone. And as you know all too well, the real-estate bubble has burst, too, taking those jobs as well.

The net result for us has been economic catastrophe and grinding rural poverty. Eight out of ten kids in our community are eligible for school lunch support. Eight out of ten.

Some people lay the blame for this at the feet of yet another round of greed-based resource extraction, come to its inevitable demise. Some people think our plight is the fault of the spotted owl. Still others think it's just the ebb and flow of a relentless and unforgiving market.

I hear people in Washington spend a lot of time debating these points of blame. Truth is, for those of us who live in the midst of it, the cause matters not. In fact, arguing about yesterday's issues is not very informative to what we do now, where we go from here.

But it is informative to look around and figure out where we are. We all agree that our forests are not in a healthy state. One hundred years of fire suppression has resulted in dog-hair thickets of trees and massive growth of flammable underbrush. And there are thousands of acres of tree plantations on the public lands that have gone without any stewardship for decades.

The unhealthy forests and fuel buildup threaten our towns and homes in the forest interface, and the very lives of those who live in them. Catastrophic fire isn't just a theoretical construct in our area. We've had several, the last of which burned 17,000 acres of the watershed that supplies drinking water for 1.2 million people downstream.

The latest catastrophe has been the recession. That has brought the experience of many other Americans closer to what we've experienced for the last 30 years. Our latest homeless survey shows people living in tents in the forest, in their cars, or struggling to stay in their homes. In our generous communities, the food banks have run out of food in spite of the heroic efforts of the volunteers and local farmers.

It's hard to say which catastrophe has been the greatest, but I'd like to paint a picture for you of where my community stands today. From 76 to 86 percent of kids have been

eligible for school lunch support over the last 10 years, a high indicator of poverty. We have high rates of domestic violence. We have high rates of methamphetamine and alcohol addiction, which in turn leads to tragic levels of child abuse. Our unemployment rate is double that of the state. And our forests and watersheds are at risk.

In addition, as we learn about carbon sequestration and climate change, we can see that the things we have done -- and things we are not now doing -- portend an even harsher future, not just for those of us who live here, but all of our downstream neighbors as well.

Meanwhile, as we deal with what all this means to people, to families, to communities and to our environment, we see politicians in Washington focusing on what group or what policy or what law is to blame.

The problem with that kind of macropolitics is that on the ground, it leads us to set upon one another with no result. Even though our community agrees on 90 percent of the possibilities for our future, partly with Washington's inspiration, we've spent most of our time over the last 30 years focused on the 10 percent of issues on which we disagree, motivated by the blame game.

Six years ago, the Blue Mountain area of Calaveras County, which I represent, decided that we'd had enough of this. We called a meeting of Native Americans, out-of-work loggers and millworkers, and local environmental organizations. We decided to put down the cudgels and get back to work. The result was the founding of the Calaveras Healthy Impact Product Solutions, a tortured name with a snappy acronym: CHIPS.

While we might have been wary of one another at the outset based on the history of our domestic dispute, there was agreement on the following things:

- Nobody was happy with the condition of the forest
- Almost everybody was unemployed
- Our long-standing communities were in jeopardy of social collapse
- And nobody was going to help us fix this – we were going to have to come up with some solutions ourselves

How did this come about? We live in steep Sierra river canyon country, so we know you have to go pretty far down before you can begin to climb back up the other side. We'd definitely reached a new low, one that enabled us to move beyond our polarized focus on the 10 percent disagreement and back to the 90 percent we agreed on.

Our future was looking bleak. Part of our town had burned down, and one man had died in a fire resulting from a combination of disputes involving friction with Native Americans and others and way too much alcohol. Now the town wasn't only down, part of it was actually gone. That block is still empty today. Then four of our kids were killed in a short period by drunk drivers. And if that were not enough, massive clearcutting on private timberland, reviled by loggers and treehuggers alike, was liquidating our forest resource, destroying the scenic beauty and limiting our prospects for eco-tourism.

And you already know the economic plight that had befallen us.

So we decided we all had an interest in restoring the health of the forest, protecting our towns from catastrophic fire, and proper stewardship of our watershed, which supplies the drinking water for 1.2 million people in the East Bay. And after some study, we learned of the need for carbon sequestration and the need to do our part to mitigate against climate change. We recognized that we needed to get our economy back on track in a sustainable way, moving beyond the failed boom-bust cycles that kicked us in the teeth so many times.

We sat down and got to work. We secured nearly $350,000 in grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Forest Foundation, Sierra Nevada Conservancy, Indian Manpower, Calaveras-Mariposa Community Action Agency and Motherlode Job Training.

We embarked on an ambitious plan to get our unemployed neighbors who know how to work in the woods back into the forest doing fire-safe work and watershed restoration. CHIPS began by training truck drivers for transportation and equipment operators for field crews, and purchasing equipment to do the work. Public and private contracts were completed in the ensuing couple of years, and we now stand poised to take this effort to the next level.

We've created the Calaveras Consensus Group to help bring that about.

Please see the attachment that shows how we've brought people together to craft the proposal we have submitted to you. We have all the key stakeholders at the table: Federal land management agencies, state and local fire departments, local agencies from air quality control to parks and recreation, regional and local environmental groups, Native American tribal groups, job training and community investment agencies, and private contractors.

Our proposal supports developing a value-added local economy around products that are now going to waste or that will burn up in the next catastrophic fire. And it means improving air quality and reducing carbon emissions, because instead of burning massive piles of slash and wood waste, we'll put it to use in a productive way and sell it.

We are planning two specific projects:

- A post and pole facility that uses small-diameter trees, and
- A wood pellet plant to produce cleaner-burning pellets for pellet stoves. Right now, locals have to buy pellets from British Columbia, and half of the price is due to the high cost of transportation.

We are also hopeful that the Buena Vista cogeneration plant will come into operation this coming year. That plant could take all the brush from our forest stewardship projects, the things we can't use for other products, and use it to provide electricity for 15,000 homes.

Between these projects, we could re-employ most of our unemployed timber industry workers in productive enterprises that benefit our community, the environment, and the economy.

To start down that path, we've identified thousands of acres of public land in immediate need of careful, ecologically sound fuel reduction work. Environmental groups have stepped up -- not to sue us, but to train workers in habitat recognition, species identification and other aspects of working greenly in the forest.

Native American tribal councils are excited about this project because part of it sends Native American crews to ancient cultural sites for restoration and removal of non-native plants. Those sites are currently a target for vandalism and looting because they're being left alone when logging or fuel reduction happens around them.

So why haven't we done this yesterday? First, we had to get over the false paradigms and enmities based on demagogic and divisive politics.

Second, we're slower than we should be because there's no capital left and no infrastructure.

I hope you all recognize that even as the nation's urban infrastructure needs rebuilding, rural areas need infrastructure, too. And it's not all roads and bridges – although we need those just like everywhere else. It's small pieces of equipment, market research, and business planning that will help facilitate the doing side of this project.

As you'll see in the addendum attached to my testimony, we've put together a proposal for Congress to consider, a way you can invest in the infrastructure we need. Our proud community is not asking for a handout – we're asking for the tools we can use to get back on our feet and take care of ourselves and you, too.

You need to know how budget decisions you make affect how this project, and others like it, function on the ground.

In our case, we've identified thousands of acres of public land for treatment, but the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management don't have enough staff to do the required environmental studies and review in a timely way.

So from the time we get the idea and recognize the remedy, to the time we can get people on the ground, is often two years or more. Even when there's a will, you haven't given us a way.

But please don't confuse us with people who say that eliminating environmental concerns or regulation is the solution to that problem.

First, if we do that, our coalition would come apart – we'd go back to arguing about things we've already agreed to and be meeting in court instead of in the forest.

Second, it's the right thing to do. We want to take care of the environment. We want to comply with the law. We just need to be able to do it timely.

That means we need long-term planning, interagency collaboration, and sufficient staffing to get the job done. We made a good start with the Calaveras Consensus Group.

What other obstacles do we face? It's hard to start or restart cogeneration plants. And BLM needs more forest stewardship funding, whether from fire-safe or other sources.

We also have to avoid the tendency of agencies to want to do everything at once, to go for economies of scale. If the projects are too big, local contractors can't compete and the work goes to huge companies from outside our area who bring in their own people to do the work.

When restoring a broken local economy, we must work at a scale small enough to allow local private contractors to do the work and start-up companies to build the local infrastructure. We have to structure this with long-term planning to attract investment and get the job done. We need a regional management approach that works on both public and private land. The wildlife and fires really don't respect the property lines.

We think we have made a good start. And just as we have learned from other groups that have gone before, we are encouraging all areas of the Sierra to look at what we are doing up near Blue Mountain.

If we succeed, our efforts will benefit the community and beyond, in a number of ways that fit everyone's definition of a triple bottom line. We'll create jobs and develop sustainable industrial and commercial enterprises. We'll reduce fuel and restore our forests. We'll improve watershed health and protect water quality. We'll protect our rich cultural and historical resources. We'll promote environmental stewardship and awareness in our youth. We'll generate renewable energy using woody biomass. We'll build community capacity for problem-solving and planning. And we'll help our area comply with California's landmark climate change law, which is setting a precedent for the nation.

And we will do it together, as a community.

This isn't just a pipe dream. It's being done in other communities, in Vermont, New Mexico. We want to be like them when we grow up.

Some think of this as an issue confined to a few people in the mountains. Some come to our area just to visit and experience the visual wonders of it, but for those of us who live and try to work here, getting this right means everything to our way of life.

And for those of you who don't live here, it could mean everything to your way of life.

Why? I'm not a scientist, but I know that well-managed forests are important for carbon sequestration. The forests of the Sierra Nevada are massive carbon sinks. If we protect those forests from catastrophic fire by removing ladder fuels and brush, and work on growing large, old trees instead, we can help the effort to slow climate change.

Conversely, if we allow those forests to burn up because we invest elsewhere, we'll see the carbon released into the atmosphere one fire at a time. Or if we continue clearcutting our private lands, we'll see the carbon released from related soil disturbance. According to Dr. Mark Harmon of Oregon State University, an expert on carbon and forests, timber harvest, especially clearcutting, removes more carbon from the forest than any other disturbance, including fire. (Comment to California Air Resources Board, October 17, 2007).

So we have to find another way.

In addition, restoring our watersheds is key to restoration of salmon and steelhead in our local Mokelumne River, which will in turn support fishing families and communities on our coast.

It's clear that getting this right *does* matter outside our small Sierra community. It's much, much bigger than our small towns or our watershed or even our mountain range or state.

We understand all that. And we don't want to fight over our 10 percent of difference any longer. Instead, we're looking to you for leadership that will support and invest in our community's future, focused on the 90 percent on which we agree.

We are done with irrelevant disputes and divisiveness – we have moved beyond it. And when we pull ourselves together this way, we need you, the leaders of our nation, to stand by our side, and help us build the public-private partnerships that can ensure our community's success. We owe our children, and grandchildren, nothing less.