CA — CAP TO CAP — DC

AIR QUALITY

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WILDFIRE & FOREST MANAGEMENT

Business Nexus

As of September 2, 2021, California recorded over 1,942,742 acres burned, compared to the 1,825,176 acres that burned in 2020[i] The California wildfires of 2020 were at the time, the largest in the State's recorded history, far surpassing records just set in 2018. Nearly 19,000 structures were destroyed and 86 people died in 2018's Camp Fire, the State's deadliest fire to date.

Decades of fire suppression, warmer average temperatures, extended drought, and inadequate forest management contribute to larger, more severe, and destructive fires. Fire seasons have been extended, threatening entire towns and suburbs. Climate change modeling predicts an acceleration of current trends. Prolonged impacts of extended fire seasons will dislocate businesses and residents, strain state and federal resources, and lead to increased air pollution, impacted water supplies, and limit the State of California progress in reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

The Federal government's policies, programs and funding need to support sustainable forest management at all stages, from fire prevention, to fire response, and post-fire recovery, as detailed below.

Requested Action

Resilience

- Ensure that the US Forest Service meets its 2020 Agreement for Shared Stewardship of California's Forest and Rangelands commitment to treat 500,000 acres per year of its lands in California. With California's matched commitment, this will be a combined 1 million acres annually.
- US Forest Service should increase the number of 20-year Master Stewardship Agreements.
- Expand the use of Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) between federal agencies and nonfederal partners to enhance fire management across jurisdictions and to support the use of fire for public safety and ecological benefits.

- Strategically identify prescribed burns to prioritize the protection of rural population centers, strengthen communication with the public about controlled burns, and increase prescribed burn acreage and effectiveness to maximize benefits, lower costs, and improve public health and safety.
- Provide funding for defensible space clearing work by community groups and Fire Safe Councils, and to local jurisdictions to harden homes, businesses, and critical infrastructure, protect essential public services, and to support the deployment of emergency service centers.
- Invest in the growth and continued maintenance of urban forests and greening, especially in underserved and vulnerable neighborhoods, to protect communities from smoke inhalation and to improve public health outcomes.
- Permit programmatic or program-level NEPA or NEPA/CEQA approvals to enable actions in similar circumstances in different locations; permit local projects to tier off established programmatic NEPA or NEPA/CEQA approvals.
- Increase the resilience of communities by reducing the risk of wildfire-related structure fires and addressing the problem of widespread insurance coverage cancellation.
- Increase funding for programs that help prevent ignition from contact with electrical equipment, and other mitigation programs, that reduce the damage from wildfires and enhance the resiliency of the electric grid.
- Increase biomass utilization by supporting:
    - Policies that position all biomass types as a value-added energy resource and that provide a level playing field between biomass facilities using a wide range of waste streams and other forms of advanced energy (such as wind and solar).
    - Markets for value-driven end-uses for biomass material such as electricity, synthetic gas, biochar, biogas, renewable natural gas, wood products, lumber, and composites products.
    - Continued funding of the US Forest Service Wood Innovations Program.
    - Continued funding for forestry management and, in particular, to retain eligibility for forestry biomass projects.

Response

- Offer our thanks for the 2018 elimination of “fire-borrowing,” and for the establishment and 2020 launch of the new FLAME Wildfire Suppression Reserve Fund for excessive wildfire costs.
- Support the development and operation of “Clean Air Centers” in rural and urban communities in the event of air quality crises.
- Provide funding for school districts to create at least one clean air center within each school (e.g. multipurpose room, gym), to enable districts to provide greater safety to students and staff during air quality crises, without needing to close entirely.
- Secure funding to deploy new monitoring technologies to key receptor areas, such as local businesses, schools, hospitals, and parks, to provide more detailed and actionable information in future air quality crises.
- Treat wildfire like other natural disasters and ensure wildfire disasters are eligible for FEMA funding under a federal emergency declaration.

Recovery

- Prioritize efforts to address the declining health of California's forests by making new federal recovery resources available to California:
    - Make available FEMA or other funding to enable air districts to recoup extraordinary expenses associated with mobilizing and responding to an air quality crisis.
    - Make available FEMA or other funding to repair damages for local public agencies, including landscape scale sediment mitigation.
    - Support and streamline the EPA's use of "exceptional event" declarations for catastrophic wildfire.

Brief Background

As natural disasters and events such as catastrophic wildfire and drought continue to increase in frequency and severity, actions that improve resilience, reduce risk, and mitigate climate impacts are critical for protecting public health and improving economies across the state. We require the best options to prepare our economy, infrastructure, and emergency response resources. Proactive investments in forest management to reduce the risk of wildfire and boost pre-disaster readiness are critical solutions to enhance the resilience and health of communities and local businesses in the face of a wide-ranging stressors.

Fire Resilience

Healthy forests add a multitude of powerful benefits to communities, ecosystems, human infrastructure (water supply, power grids), economies, and health. Examples include:

- Rural economies can be boosted through forest management, fire-risk reduction, and forest restoration efforts. In the West, national forests support 200,000 jobs and contribute over $13 billion to local economies annually. Forest health and fire prevention-related jobs growth in rural communities can include forestry work, wood products, and biomass plant operations. By contrast, wildfires, and forest deterioration due to heat and drought hurt local economies that rely on recreation, tourism, and timber.
- Water supply – Both the quantity and the quality of water from healthy forests is known to improve as compared to overly-crowded forests that largely exist in the West today[ii] Currently, forest density is calculated at 100-200 trees/acres, as compared to a density of 40-60 tress per acre in healthy forests. Furthermore, forest density impacts natural habitat and water storage capacity critical to downstream economics.[iii]
- Community Health is immediately and severely affected by wildfire smoke events, regardless of the precise location of the fire. For example, in November 2018, two concurrent fires, the Campfire in Paradise and the Woolsey Fire in Los Angeles, resulted in PM 2.5 levels in the Sacramento Region, prompting widespread school closures, affecting health, and impacting businesses.
- Community resistance to and resilience after wildfires (both business and residential) is vital in reducing the frequency and severity of disaster. Improving resistance through pre-disaster

mitigation results of hazardous events with shorter-lived and more manageable outcomes, will save lives, businesses, preserve homes and belongings, reduce the need for temporary shelter, decrease economic recovery times and lower overall recovery costs. [ii] The impact of disasters in communities is incalculable; disasters disconnect people from friends, business, schools, work, and familiar places, destroy family belongings and alter relationships, and can cause permanent harm to one's culture and way of life. Disasters can also disproportionately impact a community's most socially and economically marginalized residents.

Fire Response

When wildfire strikes, rapid mobilization of resources is essential.

- In 2018, Congress acted to end (in 2020) the practice of "fire borrowing" within the US Forest Service's budget. This critical change averts the US Forest Service's projection that within a decade, more than two-thirds of its budget will be spent to battle ever-increasing fires, "borrowed" from mission-critical programs, such as forest restoration and watershed and landscape management that otherwise prevent fires in the first place. By ending fire borrowing, these proactive forest management practices will no longer be at risk.
- The outbreak of catastrophic wildfires should be treated similarly to other natural disasters, particularly including eligibility for FEMA funding upon emergency declaration. This is particularly important in light of new funding that Congress and the Administration may be identifying for disaster recovery efforts. Funding allocated to the U.S. Forest Service is better spent on preventative activities that help reduce the risk of wildfire. The resilience of local communities and their economies will benefit from improving forest health, restoring meadows and wetlands, reusing thinned biomass, and piloting green infrastructure projects.
- Resources are needed to support communities suffering from extended wildfire-related air quality crises. During the Sacramento Region's two-week period of AQI readings of Unhealthy or Hazardous due to the Camp Fire in 2018, school districts closed and many of the most vulnerable residents had limited resources to find relief from smoke. Clean Air Centers will help meet that need in the future, just as cooling centers offer during extreme heat events. Additionally, one clean air center within each public school in a district could permit school districts to remain open, offer instruction, and provide an indoor air environment that could exceed what many students' home environments could provide.

Fire Recovery

- Community resilience (both business and residential) is vital in the face of the increasing frequency and severity of disaster. Improving resilience through pre-disaster mitigation results in hazardous events with shorter-lived and more manageable outcomes. Investments in pre-disaster resilience/mitigation can reduce the extent and severity of disasters when they happen. The impact of disasters on our communities goes well beyond the matter of quantifiable costs – they disconnect people from friends, schools, work, and familiar places; ruin family belongings and alter relationships; can cause permanent harm to one's culture and way of life; and disproportionately impact a community's most socially and economically vulnerable members.

- After a disaster, debris removal heavily impacts communities, depending on proximity and accessibility between destination facilities and wildfire areas. Throughways are impacted during debris transport and require advanced planning; pre-determining the number and placement of new and existing aggregation facilities must be considered.

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[iii] http://www.sbcounty.gov/calmast/sbc/html/healthy_forest.asp

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