



AIR QUALITY

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WILDFIRE & FOREST MANAGEMENT

Business Nexus

The West has suffered record-breaking megafires year-over-year in recent history. 2020 broke the annual record of more than 4 million acres burned in California alone; only the “Big Burn” of 1910 in Idaho and Montana compares in the recorded history of our nation. 2021 continued this catastrophic trend with more than 2.5 million acres burned including the million-acre Dixie Fire. This is a contemporary problem, with nine of the top ten megafires in California history have occurred in the last ten years, exacerbated by unmanaged forests, drought, and infestation. The consequences are chronically unhealthy air conditions across the western states, impacted waterways and forest habitats, greenhouse gas emissions, and costly loss of private and public structures. Much of the forest floor scorched by the intensity of megafires can no longer support reforestation. This crisis can be mitigated with sustainable forest management and adequately resourced fire response.

It is critical that the Federal government’s policies, programs, and funding support this cause at all stages, from prevention by way of fuels reduction, to firefighting, and post-fire recovery.

Requested Actions

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. This must include previously burned lands so that they can more quickly be moved into fire resiliency before a full ecosystem change occurs.
- Increase the number of US Forest Service 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 controlled burns for public safety and ecological benefits.

2022 Capitol-to-Capitol

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- Strategically identify prescribed burns to prioritize the protection of wildland-urban interfaces and public infrastructure, strengthen communication with the public about controlled burns, and increase prescribed burn acreage in conjunction with ecosystem management and effectiveness to maximize benefits, lower costs, and improve public health and safety.
- Bolster fuels reduction capacity by increasing the number of fire crews available for prescribed burns and standby during dry conditions to support the operation of heavy equipment, specifically in US Forest Service lands.
- 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 support the deployment of emergency service centers. This will also need to cover long-term (forever) maintenance as this work is not one-and-done activity.
- 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 National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) or NEPA/CEQA approvals to enable landscape- scale projects within forests and watersheds; permit local projects to tier off established programmatic NEPA or NEPA/CEQA approvals.
- Improve the appraisal process and determination of fair market value of waste biomass produced on federal lands by allowing nonprofit partners to use an open and competitive process, such as a request for bids (RFB) to account for the existing local market supply and demand, the timing of operations and delivery, quality of the property, and highest and best use, consistent with the Forests Fair Market Value Handbook definition. This new approach may significantly improve the current United States Forest Service (USFS) business practice.
- 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.
- Incentivize private venture investment in modern, compliant heavy equipment and hauling trucks (e.g., accelerated depreciation).
- 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.
 - Retain eligibility for forestry management by specifically funding biomass projects in forestry management.
- Incentivize private venture investment in modern, compliant heavy equipment and hauling trucks (e.g., accelerated depreciation).

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), enabling districts to provide greater safety to students and staff during air quality crises, without needing to close entirely.
- Secure funding to deploy new appropriate and validated 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 or watershed scale sediment mitigation.
 - Support and streamline the EPA’s use of “exceptional event” declarations for catastrophic wildfire. Include a component for prescribed fire activities.

Brief Background

As natural disasters and events such as catastrophic wildfires and droughts 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 and vegetation 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 wide-ranging stressors.

Fire Resilience – Background

Healthy forests and lands 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 health and vegetation management, fire-risk reduction, and forest and land 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 job 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 are known to improve as compared to overly-crowded forests that largely exist in the West today. Currently, forest density is calculated at 100-200 trees/ acres, as compared to a density of 40-60 trees per acre in healthy forests. Furthermore, forest density impacts natural habitat and water storage capacity critical to downstream economics.
- 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 Camp Fire 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.

Fire Response – Background

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 considering new funding that Congress and the Biden Administration may be identifying for disaster recovery efforts. Funding allocated for federal forestland management is better spent on preventative/proactive 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 respite 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 – Background

- Community resilience (both business and residential) is vital in the face of the increasing frequency and severity of a 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; harm one's mental well-being 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 and local agencies, 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.