

AIR QUALITY

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WILDFIRE & FOREST MANAGEMENT

Business Nexus

The west has suffered record breaking megafires year-over-year in recent history. Exacerbated by unmanaged forests, drought, and infestation, 18 of the state's largest 20 fires have been in the last 20 years. 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 and the million-acre Dixie Fire. The Mosquito Fire was California's largest in 2022 and caused major harm to public infrastructure, including water and power supply, roads, and public recreation on federal land.

The consequences of these megafires 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. The air quality impacts of catastrophic wildfire have become a public health crisis and a priority for the Placer County Air Pollution Control District, as well as other air districts in the Sacramento region. The Placer County Water Agency is seeing catastrophic impacts to the natural resources, roads, and hydropower systems in the American River watershed that flows into Sacramento. This is an existential threat to life, the environment, natural resources, public infrastructure, and access to our forests for public enjoyment. Recent polling in California indicates that 85% view wildfire as an extreme problem and 83% think money should be invested towards forest management. The United States has made catastrophic wildfire a priority in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, with funding and creation of a Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission. This crisis can be mitigated with sustainable forest management and adequately resourced fire response.

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Of the 33 million acres of forest land in California, 19 million (57%) are property of the United States. So it is critical that the Federal government's policies, programs, and funding support this cause at all stages, from prevention through fuels reduction, to firefighting, and post-fire recovery.

Requested Actions | Resilience

Expand the pace and scale of forest health projects for greater ecological value and more resilient communities. Issue areas that support this are:

- Streamline the **National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA)** to ease ecological forest health project implementation with expedited environmental and permitting processes, including:
 - Programmatic coverage and strike teams for analysis of large-scale high-priority projects and to adapt pre-project survey requirements for projects inherently designed to achieve positive ecological outcomes so they are timely and cost-efficient.
 - Develop air quality standards specific to prescribed fire under the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that will allow for this method of forest management to avoid the hazardous air quality conditions of mega-fires. Without additional considerations, new standards that do not take this into account may hurt wildfire resilience in our region and across the West.
 - Provide appropriate indemnification for contracting prescribed fire on federal lands.
- Support the **Wildfire Emergency Act of 2023, S. 188**, and its commitment to landscape-scale forest restoration, community-level resilience, and workforce development.
- Leverage **New Market Tax Credits** and other tax code incentives to support private investment in equipment, hauling trucks, capital infrastructure, and processing facilities. This is critical to meaningfully developing business sectors that support wood utilization for energy, biofuels, hydrogen, carbon sequestration, manufacturing, and construction.
- Perpetuate **multi-year stewardship and good neighbor authority contracts** to encourage long-term forest stewardship that balances reliable supply chains with ecological forest management.
- Provide funding for **community block grants** to local projects that reduce fuels and install waterline facilities that help fight fires.

Requested Actions | Response

Be responsive to avoid catastrophic scale fires while allowing for safe managed fires. Issue areas that support this are:

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- Create a **competitive grant process** within the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program to fund first responder preparedness to natural disasters. Local agencies must focus on preparedness with a particular concentration on training, equipping, and exercising. Aerial attack and fuel breaks (bulldozers and hand crews) are critical to mission success and special operations are often underfunded in the fire service.
- Ensure a prepared fire response workforce by **funding Career Technical Education (CTE) programs** and **addressing the federal firefighter pay gap**.
- Establish a mechanism for air districts to be eligible for **direct reimbursement from FEMA** for wildfire smoke response expenses.
- Establish a mechanism for local air districts to be **reimbursed for providing staff** to serve as Air Resource Advisors (ARA). Staff from local air districts currently cannot serve as due to an inability for the USFS to reimburse their costs.

Requested Actions | Recovery

Restore forests and communities that have been ravaged by wildfire to preserve our environment, natural resources, and community value. Issue areas that support this are:

- Invest in **post-fire recovery teams** to more adequately restore federal lands devastated by wildfire, an activity which minimizes landslides and upland erosion to protect waterways, natural resources, and built infrastructure.
- Fund the US Forest Service for multi-year projects to **restore roads** on their land that are failing because of the externalities of wildfire. Access to roads is critical for land management, recreation, and public safety.
- Fully leverage the **National Incident Management Operations (NIMO)** and **Emergency Relief for Federally Owned Roads (ERFOR)** programs.

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 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.

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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 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. Under current conditions, forest density is estimated to be in the range of 500 to 1,000 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 in light of new funding that Congress and the 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.

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- 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 healthier than 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 disaster. Improving resilience through pre-disaster mitigation results in hazardous events with shorter-lived and more manageable outcomes. Investments in pre-disaster resilience and mitigation can reduce the extent and severity of disasters when they happen. The impact of disasters on our communities goes well beyond their quantifiable costs – they disconnect people from friends, schools, work, and familiar places, ruin family belongings and alter relationships, harm 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, 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.