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WILDFIRE & FOREST HEALTH TEAM

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RESILIENCE, RESPONSE, RECOVERY

Requested Actions:

We ask that our representatives:

Resilience

Resilience requires that forest lands be managed for ecologic health and fire resistance and to safeguard our communities in the wildland-urban interface.

- Support federal agency investment in innovative wood utilization, including biomass to energy projects, through grants, and tax incentives.
- Articulate a clear path on how the federal government will achieve its commitment to treat 500,000 acres of forested lands in California by 2025.
- Increase funding and capacity to support the successful partnerships that are working with the U.S. Forest Service to deploy prescribed fire in the Tahoe and El Dorado National Forests.
- Ensure that federal programs under the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), (Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC), and the Forest Service can be used for proactive investments in community wildfire preparedness, including for waterlines and fire hydrants.

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Response

Response means preparing our communities and firefighting forces for wildfire events.

- Expand FEMA’s Assistance to Firefighters Grants (AFG) and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grants to aid local fire agencies in wildfire response.
- Include local wildland air districts as eligible agencies for FEMA reimbursement in wildfire response.
- End the practice of federal agencies “resource shopping” for wildfire response.
- Support the Fair Pay for Federal Firefighters Act (H.R. 4831).

Recovery

Recovery involves investing in remediation of the peril left behind after wildfire, both in our communities and in the forested headwaters.

- Support the Watershed Protection and Forest Recovery Act of 2024 (Senate).
- Support the Wildfire Response Improvement Act (H.R. 7070).

Business Nexus

Catastrophic wildfires are increasing in intensity and significantly impacting the American west: From claiming lives, engulfing communities, impairing commerce, harming the environment, to destroying critical infrastructure. Western wildfires also have national implications for air quality and public health.

A September 2023 publication by Stanford University¹ reveals how particulate emissions from wildfires in recent years have slowed or even reversed progress towards cleaner air in 35 states, erasing a quarter of the gains made since 2000. Wildfires that burned in 2020 alone put approximately 112 million metric tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere².

Polling of American voters in 2022³ offered the following public sentiments:

- 3 in 5 rate wildfire as a serious problem, just behind inflation and housing.
- 4 in 5 support increased federal investment in wildfire resilience.
- 39 percent know someone who has been personally impacted by wildfire or smoke.

¹ Burke, M., Childs, M.L., de la Cuesta, B. et al. The contribution of wildfire to PM_{2.5} trends in the USA. Nature 622, 761–766 (2023).

² California Air Resources Board, 2022 Scoping Plan Update.

³ Metz, D. and Everitt, M. American Voters Views of Wildfire and Forest Management. FM3 Research (2022).

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This issue is also affecting the lives of citizens with severe impacts to the cost and accessibility of homeowners insurance. The California Association of Realtors⁴ reports the following:

- 78 percent of homeowners in risk-prone areas have difficulty with coverage.
- 58 percent of buyer-side transactions have been affected by wildfire risk.
- El Dorado County is one of the five most affected counties in California (the other four are in southern California).

It is well established that catastrophic wildfires are caused by high fuel loads in unmanaged forest lands coinciding with the changing climate (more extreme temperatures, drier conditions, and stronger winds). Of California's 20 largest fires, 18 have occurred in the 21st century, and half in the past five years.⁵ In California's six-county Capital Region, the rate of acreage burning has increased five times since the year 2000.

Of the 33 million acres of forest land in California, 19 million (57 percent) are owned and managed by the federal government. About half of all land in Placer and El Dorado counties is forest owned by the federal government.

This team advocates for an intergovernmental approach to policy and funding issues given the cross-jurisdictional nature of wildfire challenges. The report from the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission,⁶ authorized by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, has been used to establish wildfire principles related to resilience, response, and recovery.

Background

The report of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission, completed in September 2023, has provided 148 recommendations for policies and funding. Where certain commission recommendations intersect with the wildfire principles set forth in this paper, those recommendations are recited.

Resilience

Given the breadth of policy and funding issues involved in making resilient communities, this background is broken into four categories: 1) fuels reduction; 2) wood utilization; 3) prescribed fire; and 4) community preparedness.

⁴ California Association of Realtors, 2022 Wildfire Risk Discovery Survey.

⁵ Haddock, V., Cone, M., and D'Agostino, J.O. Track California Wildfires. Calmatters website: <https://calmatters.org/california-wildfire-map-tracker/>

⁶ United States Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission, 2023 Report.

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1. Fuels reduction:

Central to the wildfire problem is overgrown forest lands in both the headwaters and wildland-urban interface (WUI). Our region is home to landscape scale partnerships and projects, but additional policy changes are needed to expedite fuels reduction projects on federal lands and to encourage communities to perform their own fuels reduction projects. For long-term success, policies need to support ecological land management and be financially sustainable. Thus, markets are needed for the materials removed: both timber and biomass.

The French Meadows Forest Restoration Project (FMP) is a 29,000-acre project in the headwaters of the American River, just upstream of French Meadows Reservoir. Within this large project footprint are 9,000 acres of fuels reduction and 6,000 acres of prescribed fire. The project is the first landscape scale forest management collaboration of its kind and includes federal, state, local, and non-governmental partners. Environmental review under the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) took two years for analysis, documentation, and field surveys.

The Nature Conservancy⁷ evaluated the environmental review of the FMP and developed recommendations to ease this process for similar ecological forest health projects. These recommendations are built upon programmatic coverage and U.S. Forest Service strike teams to process large-scale, high-priority projects. They also have recommendations for pre-project resource surveys to reduce cost and time.

Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission recommendations consistent with these principles are:

- Recommendation #17: “Invest in fuels reduction treatments.”
- Recommendation #18: “Congress should support and expand the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program.”
- Recommendations #32: “Expand funding and staffing for planning and Interdisciplinary Teams of federal land management agencies.”
- Recommendation #33: “Explore mechanisms to make planning more effective and efficient, such as improved information gathering, training, staffing, collaboration, and programmatic analyses for restoration and hazardous fuels reduction activities.”

2. Wood utilization:

⁷ Edelson, D. and Hertslet, A. Restoring Forests through Partnership: Lessons Learned from the French Meadows Project. The Nature Conservancy (2019).

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With the USFS committed to treating 500,000 acres of federal lands each year to improve forest resiliency and reduce wildfire risk, there is tremendous pressure to find beneficial uses for the materials that are generated as part of these activities. Currently, the least-costly and most expedient option is to pile burn the material, which produces significant particulate emissions and community impacts. As the timeframes within the calendar year for safe pile burning become limited, piles are left to decay and release methane. The following chart⁸ presents the disparate air quality and climate impacts of pile burning versus biomass to energy plants:

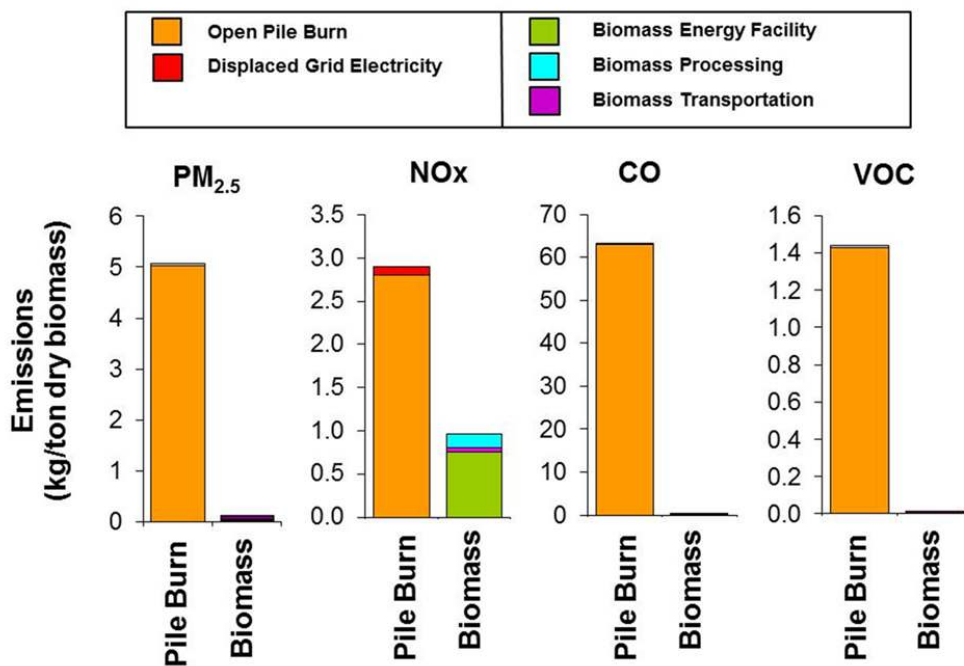


Figure 1. Emission comparison of pile burning to biomass energy plants.

A number of wood utilization alternatives are available to reduce air quality impacts, enhance renewable fuels, and support rural economies. These alternatives include energy, biofuels, hydrogen, carbon sequestration, manufacturing, and construction. Tax code incentives, grant funding, and regulatory policies to support private investment in equipment, hauling trucks, capital infrastructure, and processing facilities should be authorized. Federal agencies should support efforts to expand non-burning fuel reduction technologies, such as air curtain incinerators and biomass projects, especially in areas in and near wildland urban interfaces (WUI).

⁸ Springsteen, B. California Biomass Facilities Play an Important Role in Improving Air Quality and Reducing Greenhouse Gases. Placer County Air Pollution Control District (2019).

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Commission recommendations consistent with these principles are:

- Recommendation #19: “Congress should invest in wood processing facilities and the wood utilization sector more generally.”
- Recommendation #20: “Fund more research and pilot projects for biofuels and biomass utilization technologies and opportunities through a new collaboration between the Forest Service Research & Development and the Department of Energy.”
- Recommendation #21: “Incentivize the adoption of new technologies and processing systems to produce value added and demand-driven innovative wood products.”

3. Prescribed fire:

Prescribed fire had been a tool used by Native Americans in California for thousands of years to support healthy and resilient forest ecosystems. This resulted in wildfires that were smaller in scale and lower in intensity. But that changed over the last 100+ years as fire suppression became the standard response to forest fires. Recent research published by Stanford and Columbia Universities⁹ has shown that the use of low-intensity prescribed burning can reduce the risk of devastating wildfires by 60 percent.

Consistent with these outcomes, federal firefighting agencies should be given the administrative capacity to order resources for prescribed fire with the same expediency as for wildfire response. Further, federal funding should be appropriated for locally deployed prescribed fire on and adjacent to federal lands. Indemnification and a claims fund should be provided for third party damages caused by prescribed fire on federal lands, subject to best practices. Finally, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency should provide effective and straightforward tools as a part of the National Ambient Air Quality Standards specific to prescribed fire.

Commission recommendations consistent with these principles are:

- Recommendation #10: “Congress should advance legislation to support a compensation or claims fund for burn damages to third parties that can quickly provide financial relief in instances when burn practitioners adhere to identified best practices.”
- Recommendation #14: “Congress should instruct the agencies to develop the necessary administrative systems to allow resource ordering for prescribed fire to be as seamless as it is for wildfire response.”

⁹ Wu, et al., Low-intensity fires mitigate the risk of high-intensity wildfires in California’s forests Sci. Adv.9, eadi4123 (2023)

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- Recommendation #42: “Direct the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of the Interior, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to work together to expeditiously evaluate current federal regulations and guidance around the treatment of smoke from wildland fire in air quality management programs with the intent of ensuring the programs can accommodate increased use of beneficial fire. Such an evaluation includes the exceptional events pathway and making any necessary changes to enhance programmatic and procedural ease and clarity while ensuring protection of public health, in a manner consistent with the Clean Air Act. Further, Congress should provide resources to ensure federal, state, and local authorities can expand their capacity to document and exclude wildfire and beneficial fire smoke from regulatory significance.”

4. Community preparedness:

Preparing for a disaster is crucial to protecting the safety of people, families, and communities at large. Whether it's having a meet-up location, a go-bag, or an evacuation plan, being prepared can make all the difference. But preparedness isn't just for individuals - it's equally important for government agencies and non-profits to have an Emergency Operations Plan in place. To be truly prepared, plans must be developed, equipment must be procured and maintained, and roles and responsibilities must be trained.

Wildfire doesn't respect jurisdictional boundaries, and those with the most to lose should be empowered and funded to develop community-based preparedness. WUI communities adjacent to federally owned lands should be empowered to lead, collaborate, and coordinate preparedness with federal agencies to minimize the loss of life and property. FEMA is best equipped to help wildfire-prone communities prepare for the worst. The federal government should continue to expand FEMA's BRIC, AFG, SAFER, and other grant programs to include community preparedness for wildfire. This support should include grants for waterline infrastructure and bolstering firefighting capacity.

Commission recommendations consistent with these principles are:

- Recommendation #1: “Congress should establish a Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program via an interagency coordinating partnership including the U.S. Forest Service, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the United States Fire Administration, the Office of Wildland Fire on behalf of the Department of the Interior's land management agencies, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology as principal agencies, to proactively address wildfire risk reduction actions and increase ignition resistance of the built environment.”

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- Recommendation #4: “Provide dedicated funding to evaluate, build and maintain existing federal, state, and local wildfire hazard data sets and identify a use case to refine and, if necessary, expand national datasets.”
- Recommendation #56: “Congress should increase support for the U.S. Fire Administration to provide expanded community-based wildfire training and engagement of the nation’s non-federal fire service; promote fire-adapted communities to build community resilience; and improve coordination with wildland fire management as a critical and necessary partner in wildfire risk reduction.”
- Recommendation #57: “Congress and agencies should expand support for the further development and utilization of pre-fire response planning, such as the Potential Operational Delineations methodology, as a science based, collaborative, and interdisciplinary framework for improving wildfire management and mitigation, integration of land management objectives with wildfire management objectives, and collaborative engagement.”
- Recommendation #58: “Increase and foster local participation in collaborative pre-fire planning and management through pre-fire planning initiatives like the Potential Operational Delineations process.”

Response

Wildfires that originate on federally owned lands and pose a significant threat to local communities should be extinguished as soon as possible. In these instances, federal agencies should be discouraged from “resource shopping” and collaborate with state and local agencies to create quick response teams for the best outcomes. Through agreements with state and local agencies, quick response teams should be trained and equipped to respond accordingly.

FEMA and the United States Fire Administrator (USFA) should lead a collaboration between federal agencies (e.g. U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs) and local fire agencies to establish response protocols that prioritize closest resource response to reduce life and property loss in any adjacent wildland-urban interface. The USFA should also develop and deliver training, professional development, and other programs for emergency responders. The federal firefighter pay gap should also be addressed to encourage greater parity and collaboration among personnel at various levels of government.

Because of the significant health impacts and public awareness of wildfire smoke events, significant resources are deployed by local air quality agencies to apprise the public of current air quality conditions. But this work is not reimbursable under federal emergency response guidelines, especially since the wildfire smoke impacts may fall well away from the active wildfire event. FEMA should establish authority and procedures for local air quality agencies to be eligible for direct reimbursement for providing staff to serve as Air Resource Advisors.

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Commission recommendations consistent with these principles are:

- Recommendation #41: “While enabling proactive use of beneficial fire, Congress should increase the capacity of federal agencies, including Environmental Protection Agency, Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Department of the Interior to work with state, local and Tribal governments to ensure that air quality, public health, and land management programs work toward minimizing impacts of smoke to human health and to ensure communities and individuals are better prepared for anticipated smoke from all forms of wildland fire.”
- Recommendation #51: “In order to facilitate the prioritization of public safety in response resource ordering, Congress should establish a task force of relevant entities to review eligible costs for the purposes of expedited resource deployment and reimbursements processes.”
- Recommendation #52: “Some locations offer positive examples of more effective resource mobilization and should serve as models for other areas.”
- Recommendation #53: “Congress should direct a task force to explore the potential to improve the national resource ordering and status system and ensure that it is more accessible to qualified entities and individuals.”
- Recommendation #54: “Increase access to qualifications and training opportunities for all partners.”
- Recommendation #55: “Create and fund more training opportunities for the mitigation and management response workforce.”
- Recommendation #84: “Increase wages and benefits for the federal wildland fire workforce.”

Recovery

Federal lands that succumb to catastrophic wildfire are often in the high country and headwaters, which are generally lands of the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, or the National Park Service. The aftermath of these events leaves steep hillsides exposed with no potential for vegetation to regrow ahead of the coming storm season and no readily available federal funding stream for their recovery.

A recent example is the Mosquito Fire in September of 2022, which burned more than 75,000 acres in the Tahoe and El Dorado National Forests. Torrential storms the following winter caused washout of multiple federal roads that are critical for public access, safety, and operation of water supply and hydropower projects. Landslides caused by recent fires have delivered 300,000 yards of sediment to Placer County Water Agency’s Oxbow Reservoir, taking up 15 percent of reservoir capacity and costing tens of millions of dollars to remove. Future landslides from the Mosquito Fire are expected to double this sediment burden.

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Federal agencies need to increase post-fire recovery capacity to more adequately restore lands devastated by wildfire. They need to focus on mitigating landslides and upland erosion, which will protect waterways, reservoirs, and roadways.

Federal agencies need to be funded for multi-year projects to restore roads that are failing because of wildfire. Agencies should leverage the National Incident Management Operations and Emergency Relief for Federally Owned Roads programs.

Commission recommendations consistent with these principles are:

- Recommendation #35: “Authorize and incentivize flood mitigation, water quality, and source water protection projects in existing wildfire mitigation and wildfire recovery programs to protect community water supplies.”
- Recommendation #67: “Provide funding to local entities (e.g., community-based organizations, collaboratives, public utilities, watershed coalitions, fire departments and districts, Tribes, and local government) to proactively complete assessments of values at risk susceptible to post-fire impacts.”
- Recommendation #77: “Increase authorizations and appropriations for watershed rehabilitation programs post-wildfire.”