



Sierra Forest Legacy
Protecting Sierra Nevada Forests and Communities



Forest Issues Group



May 15, 2017

Senator Holly Mitchell, Chair
Senate Budget Committee
State Capitol, Room 5019
Sacramento, CA 95814

Assemblyman Phil Ting, Chair
Assembly Budget Committee
State Capitol, Room 6026
Sacramento, CA 95814

Senator Bob Wieckowski, Chair
Budget Subcommittee 2 on Resources,
Environmental Protection, Energy and
Transportation
State Capitol, Room 5019
Sacramento, CA 95814

Assemblyman Richard Bloom, Chair
Budget Subcommittee 3 on Resources and
Transportation
State Capitol, Room 6026
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Support for Additional Investments in Prescribed Fire to Increase Forest Resilience, and Actions to Protect Communities from Fire

Dear Senators Mitchell and Wieckowski, and Assemblymembers Ting and Bloom,

California evolved with fire: it has always burned, and it always will. Our ecosystems, their wildlife, flora, fauna and functioning, are all uniquely adapted to fire. However, for the last century we have aggressively fought and effectively suppressed nearly all wildland fires. Coupled with past timber and range management practices, fuels in the form of overly dense small trees and brush have accumulated making our forests, woodlands and rangelands less resilient to wildfire. We've seen an increasing trend in uncharacteristically large and severe fires that endanger public health, infrastructure, wildlife, and water supplies. Our recent drought only exacerbated this long-term trend.

California needs to take decisive action to restore resilience to our natural and working lands, and there is no management option that does not include fire. And we will either pay down the road in fire suppression spending, and with all the ecological and public costs, or we can pay now with prescribed fire as a down payment on more resilient ecosystems, enhanced public health and safety and more secure infrastructure. With advances in cooperative partnerships like the statewide "Fire MOU Partnership" and leadership from CAL FIRE, we have a renewed opportunity to utilize prescribed fire as a safe, efficient, effective and ecologically appropriate management tool.

Our organizations support significantly increasing the funding for prescribed fire as a key tool to restore our forests. We also call for continuing the grant program for projects that improve safety by reducing fuels near communities at risk.

Dramatically increasing the scale of prescribed fire has many benefits in our fire-adapted state:

- Public health impacts from smoke are reduced as we have greater control over the timing and intensity of burns compared to the out-of-control high-severity fires that are more likely to occur when we focus exclusively on suppression.ⁱ
- There is a reduced risk of uncharacteristic, high severity fire which threatens people, wildlife, homes, infrastructure, and water supplies.
- Plants and animals that are adapted to fire can thrive. Restoring low and mixed severity fires improves ecological function and creates a mosaic of different habitats which increases biological diversity.
- It helps achieve California's climate goals by protecting the larger, carbon-rich trees and making our forests more resilient to fires and other disturbances.

In light of these many benefits of increasing prescribed and managed fires, and the clear downsides of delaying to do so, there is widespread agreement that the funding for prescribed fire should be increased. Recent discussions in Senate and Assembly budget subcommittees, the February 27th joint informational hearing on *Tree Mortality, Forest Health, and Prescribed Fire*,ⁱⁱ and the Little Hoover Commission, have all focused attention on how aggressive fire suppression has led to unnaturally high fuel loads in California's ecosystems. Experts universally agreed that

increasing the pace and scale of prescribed fire is one key to enhancing drought resilience in CA ecosystems and protecting public health and safety.

While the May Revise recognizes the impacts of climate change on fire behavior by designating \$42 million for expanded staffing and 42 new fire engines, the proposal fails to adequately fund actions to increase forest resilience. We must increase investments in proactive efforts, in order to reduce future damage and stem the ever-increasing cost and difficulty of suppression.

Prescribed fire must be increased as part of comprehensive landscape-scale strategies to improve forest health that employ many different tools. For instance, mechanical thinning may be more appropriate in populated areas near the wildland-urban interface. However, mechanical thinning alone is insufficient as it does not provide all of the ecological benefits of fire and is limited in its reach – for instance, mechanical thinning is only possible on less than 30% of the National Forest system lands in the Sierra Nevada.ⁱⁱⁱ Using mechanical thinning, prescribed fires, and managed natural fires in appropriate areas can begin to address overly dense forest conditions resulting from years of fire suppression and increase the long-term health and resilience of our forests.

As your committees consider the May Revise proposal and make legislative adjustments we urge the following appropriations to increase the resilience of California’s forests and other natural and working lands:

\$10 million to CAL FIRE to accelerate the pace and scale of prescribed fire usage, including the following activities:

- Prescribed burning by CalFire in collaboration with tribes, non-profits, fire safe councils, local fire districts, or resource conservation districts;
- Grants to tribes, non-profits, fire safe councils, local fire districts, or resource conservation districts to support prescribed fire projects and related community outreach and education;
- Prescribed and managed fire activities on National Forests, which have some of the greatest need for prescribed fire, and present great opportunities to treat large areas efficiently and effectively;
- Capacity for CalFire to identify, plan and implement their prescribed fire program, including necessary environmental, air quality monitoring, and archeological surveys and reports.

And \$10 million for fuel reduction, forest improvement, and community protection projects in the Wildland Urban Interface:

- Appropriated from the State Responsibility Area (SRA) fund to CalFire’s existing Fire Protection and Tree Mortality grant program to support efforts that reduce fire risks to communities in the SRA.

While the scale of the challenge is enormous and it will take many years to restore resilience to our vital forests and watersheds, these investments are an important step in reinvigorating our

use of prescribed fire, while also making communities safer. We appreciate your focus on this issue and urge you to augment the budget to make these proactive investments in restoring resilience.

Yours truly,

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Lenya Quinn-Davidson
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Cc: Governor Edmund G. Brown
Chief Ken Pimlott, Director, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection
Members of the Budget Sub-committees

ⁱ Long, J.W., Tarnay, L.W., North, M.P., 2017. Aligning Smoke Management with Ecological and Public Health Goals. *Journal of Forestry* 115.

ⁱⁱ <http://antr.assembly.ca.gov/content/2017-hearings>

ⁱⁱⁱ North, M., Brough, A., Long, J., Collins, B., Bowden, P., Yasuda, D., Miller, J. & Sugihara, N. 2015, "Constraints on mechanized treatment significantly limit mechanical fuels reduction extent in the Sierra Nevada", *Journal of Forestry*, vol. 113, no. 1, pp. 40-48.