

# Here's a smart way to stretch California's wildfire prevention budget | Opinion

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## Viewpoints

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California's wildfire prevention budget could go further with the Forest Legacy amendment, enlisting land trusts to protect forests and reduce wildfire risks. Retired Capt. Scott Wejmar/Turlock Fire Department

With fire season now upon us and the reality of years of recovery ahead from the devastation of recent Los Angeles wildfires, California faces a grim reality: our prevention resources are stretched dangerously thin just when we need them most. Every dollar must work harder before the next disaster strikes.

But a straightforward, bipartisan solution exists — one that could improve our fire response and reduce wildfire risk across California's forests while freeing up critical state resources, all by simply removing an outdated bureaucratic roadblock.

Right now, an invisible barrier blocks a powerful tool for protecting California's forests. The federal Forest Legacy Program helps private landowners keep their forests healthy through conservation easements — legal agreements that permanently restrict development, protect fisheries, water supplies and wildlife habitat, and support sustainable economic uses.

Easements allow landowners to partner with entities that will help them provide benefits of enormous public value and ensure a lasting legacy of conservation, all while meeting twin goals of economic production and environmental resource protection. But here's the catch: current rules only allow these easements to be held by government agencies, driving away countless landowners who simply don't want the government as their forever partner.

This sensible fix, the “[Forest Legacy Management Flexibility Act](#),” introduced by two California representatives, Democrat John Garamendi (CA-08) and Republican Ken Calvert (CA-41), offers a targeted solution. Being proposed as an amendment to the larger Fix Our Forests Act currently being considered in the Senate, this amendment could unlock millions of dollars in forest protection funding without spending a single additional tax dollar by allowing trusted nonprofit land trusts to hold these conservation easements — not just government agencies. With private landowners owning more than 60% of our nation’s forests, including vast acreage across California, this could be a game-changer.

California Sen. Alex Padilla, one of the four managers of the [Fix Our Forests Act](#), as well as Colorado Sen. John Hickenlooper, understand the value of making this simple, no-cost amendment that will benefit their states while allowing other states the flexibility to continue holding such easements if they wish.

The Forest Legacy Management Flexibility amendment deserves particular attention from Californians. The reality is stark: We need every tool available to prevent the next Paradise or Altadena wildfire. We urgently need to focus our fire resources on managing fire risks while leveraging innovative, cost-effective prevention strategies that protect our forests and the communities that depend on them.

This obstacle particularly burdens California, which relies on trusted land trust partners to implement conservation across the state. Tying up the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection’s limited personnel in holding such easements is not optimal use of their time. In fact, the state’s own Forest Legacy program — and every other conservation program — already works with qualified land trusts to hold such easements. Every time a landowner declines to participate because of this restriction, California loses an opportunity to expand its wildfire resilience without spending additional state resources.

The Forest Legacy Management Flexibility amendment would allow states the option of designating accredited land trusts to hold conservation easements purchased with federal funding from the U.S. Forest Service’s Forest Legacy Program.

California’s wildfire management approach is shifting from suppression to learning to manage fire and fire risks through prevention. By leveraging trusted land trusts and conservation nonprofits, we can enhance our prevention efforts without additional state spending, allowing California to invest more strategically in proactive forest health management.

Land trusts bring unique advantages to this partnership. Organizations like [Pacific Forest Trust](#), which has conserved over 360,000 acres, often operate at the grassroots level, intimately understanding the needs and aspirations of landowners and communities. By removing this bureaucratic barrier, California could conserve thousands more acres of

forestland without adding to state administrative burdens. Instead of the state monitoring and enforcing conservation easements, these responsibilities would be borne by qualified land trusts that already have established relationships.

The Forest Legacy Management Flexibility amendment would help California achieve multiple goals simultaneously: reduce catastrophic wildfire risk, conserve critical forest ecosystems, maintain working landscapes that support rural economies and protect watersheds that supply drinking water to millions of Californians. Most importantly, it would allow California to maximize its limited wildfire prevention budget by sharing responsibilities with trusted partners.

This opportunity for practical action offers a path forward that could help protect our forests and communities while making better use of our limited wildfire prevention resources.

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