



RURAL COUNTY REPRESENTATIVES
OF CALIFORNIA

August 26, 2020

The Honorable Richard Bloom
Member, California State Assembly
State Capitol, Room 2003
Sacramento, CA 95814

**RE: Assembly Bill 1659 – SUPPORT
As Amended August 25, 2020**

Dear Assembly Member Bloom:

On behalf of the Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC), we offer our support for your recently-amended Assembly Bill 1659. This measure establishes a robust, continuous funding source to improve the health and resilience of California's forests and wildlands to help prevent future catastrophic wildfire events, while bolstering the state's emergency response capabilities to fire events and helping residents safeguard their homes. RCRC is an association of thirty-seven rural California counties, and the RCRC Board of Directors is comprised of elected supervisors from those member counties.

RCRC member counties contain much of California's forested lands, including more than 70 percent of the State's national forest lands. While rural communities have historically borne the majority of destruction caused by high severity wildfires, wildfire risk has now become a statewide public safety concern as the wildland urban interface spreads over larger areas of the State due to climate change and impacts of renewed drought conditions in California. Wildfires are also a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions and compromise the quality and quantity of much of the State's water supply. The health and resilience of our forests and wildlands impacts every Californian.

As of August 24th, 625 active fires raged across California due to lightning storms sparking dry vegetation earlier in the month. Seventeen of these fires have been classified as major fire events, and the SCU Lightning Complex Fire and LNU Lightning Complex Fire are now the second and third largest wildfires in state history. More alarming is that these two fires are yet to reach 50 percent containment and the LNU Lightning Complex Fire has already claimed five lives. The fires have also resulted in some of the worst air quality in the world for Northern California residents, leading air

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quality management districts to declare unhealthy air quality indexes daily while the fires persist.

Sadly, the current fires are not likely to be the last we see in 2020. Each year, California's wildfire season gets more severe, and more resources must be spent on fire suppression and emergency response as we continue to behave in a reactionary fashion. We continue to find ourselves struggling to fund necessary efforts to get ahead of wildfires such as large-scale forest and vegetation management, fuels treatment, watershed restoration, emergency response and evacuation staging, and measures to help low income residents harden their homes and maintain their defensible space. We also currently lack the necessary workforce to achieve many of our wildfire prevention and forest management goals, and have repeatedly seen well-intentioned legislation to address the workforce fail to cross the goalposts.

RCRC believes that AB 1659 could finally provide the sorely needed funding stream to make a real difference in the state's wildfire prevention and emergency response goals. By utilizing a surcharge on the "big three" investor-owned utilities, the bill also fairly targets the areas suffering from the highest rate of catastrophic fires and in turn focuses prevention efforts in those communities. It is a much more equitable funding structure than other efforts that have been utilized in the past.

While we acknowledge the positive components of AB 1659, RCRC requests an amendment to Section 3279 of the bill to specifically empower counties with the ability to contribute to wildfire prevention and response efforts. Additionally, RCRC requests funding to support the state network of fair facilities in their role in wildfire emergency response efforts, including as emergency evacuation centers and fire staging areas. The requested amendments are as follows:

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(b) Not less than two hundred million dollars (\$200,000,000) for a pre-hazard mitigation grant program developed by the Office of Emergency Services in conjunction with the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection that ~~may~~ **shall include grants to local agencies, including counties local and state agencies,** and others for improvements to detection, warning, and evacuation systems, emergency notification systems, and improvements in fire and disaster response planning, communication, and infrastructure. Grants may also be awarded for structural hardening projects and to create incentives for the installation of microgrids, distributed generation, and storage systems powered by clean energy.

(e) Not less than two hundred million dollars (\$200,000,000) for the development and implementation of community wildfire protection plans through grants to **counties**, fire safe councils, resource

conservation districts, and other qualified entities, including local fire agencies and districts, to develop and implement activities to enhance community wildfire safety, defensible space, home hardening, and other projects to improve fire resilience.

i) Not less than three hundred million dollars (\$300,000,000) to the Strategic Growth Council to establish cooling centers, clean air centers, hydration stations, emergency shelters, backup solar electrical generation and storage facilities, **including those located at the network of fair facilities, county and state-owned facilities,** to safeguard vulnerable populations from extreme events.

RCRC supports your AB 1659, and we appreciate your consideration of our requested amendments. RCRC looks forward to working with you as we continue to work on preventing future catastrophic wildfire events. Please do not hesitate to contact me at sheaton@rcrcnet.org if you have any questions or would like to discuss further.

Sincerely,



STACI HEATON
Senior Regulatory Affairs Advocate

cc: The Honorable Kevin Mullin, Member of the State Assembly
The Honorable Laura Friedman, Member of the State Assembly
The Honorable Eduardo Garcia, Member of the State Assembly
The Honorable Jacqui Irwin, Member of the State Assembly
The Honorable Luz Rivas, Member of the State Assembly
The Honorable Robert Rivas, Member of the State Assembly
The Honorable Jim Wood, Member of the State Assembly
The Honorable Cecilia Aguiar-Curry, Member of the State Assembly
The Honorable Marc Berman, Member of the State Assembly
The Honorable Phil Ting, Member of the State Assembly
The Honorable Bill Dodd, Member of the State Senate
The Honorable Robert Hertzberg, Member of the State Senate
The Honorable Melissa Hurtado, Member of the State Senate
The Honorable Anthony Portantino, Member of the State Senate
The Honorable Henry Stern, Member of the State Senate
The Honorable Ben Allen, Member of the State Senate
The Honorable Steven Bradford, Member of the State Senate
The Honorable Hannah-Beth Jackson, Member of the State Senate

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The Honorable Mike McGuire, Member of the State Senate
The Honorable Bob Wieckowski, Member of the State Senate
Wade Crowfoot, Secretary, California Natural Resources Agency
Rachel Wagoner, Deputy Legislative Secretary to the Governor