



To: Members of the RCRC Board of Directors
From: Staci Heaton, Senior Regulatory Affairs Advocate
Date: September 14, 2020
Re: Forest Management and Wildfire Update

Summary

Several efforts have been underway in the Legislature and various state and federal agencies to address California's persistent catastrophic wildfire events. This memo provides an update on many of those activities, as well as RCRC's involvement and advocacy efforts.

Background

California has experienced increased levels of wildfire risk, and faster, more intense burning fires each year over the past decade due to years of mismanaged forests combined with escalating impacts from climate change. In the month of August 2020, California has seen record-breaking wildfire activity from extreme dry conditions exacerbated by a series of statewide lightning storms. The August Complex Fire in Glenn, Lake, Mendocino, Tehama, and Trinity Counties is now the largest complex wildfire in California state history at more than 471,000 acres.

The state is undertaking a number of actions designed to respond to California's increased fire activity in both the near and long-term, and the federal government has also begun taking measures to respond to increased wildfire activity nationwide. The state is also grappling with how to ensure the safety of its residents and firefighting response crews during wildfire season amidst the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Issue

Wildfire Legislation and Forest Health Funding Proposals

A number of wildfire prevention and forest health funding measures were proposed during this year's legislative session, but few actually survived the August 31st end of session deadline. RCRC-supported bills by Assembly Member Laura Friedman, Assembly Bill 3074 and Assembly Bill 3164, both await the Governor's signature and would establish a 5-foot ember-resistant zone around homes in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) and develop a WUI risk model for use by local governments in future planning activities. Assembly Bill 3012 (Wood), which provides nonrenewed homeowners with additional assistance finding coverage and eases itemization requirements for homeowners that have suffered total losses during an emergency, also survived and sits on the Governor's desk.

Assembly Bill 1659 (Bloom) was amended during the last week of session as a last minute effort at a large-scale funding bill for forest management, wildfire prevention and emergency response. The bill proposed \$3 billion in funding for various wildfire-related programs, including large scale forest restoration projects, home hardening and defensible space aid for low income homeowners, and funds for state-owned fairgrounds used for emergency staging and evacuation sites. The funds would have been securitized through bonds upfront, then repaid through an extension of a current utility surcharge on Pacific Gas & Electric, San Diego Gas & Electric, and Southern California Edison customers which amounts to less than \$1 per month for residential ratepayers. While RCRC supported AB 1659, the bill stalled, as did a smaller, \$500 million budget proposal for forest management, fuels treatment and emergency response efforts.

It should be noted that no Cap-and-Trade expenditure plan for the 2020-21 budget year has been approved by the Legislature. This means that the \$200 million promised by 2018's Senate Bill 901 (Dodd) has yet to be allocated for this budget year and may not be available in full due to diminished auction revenues due to COVID-19. Indications from Legislative budget chairs are that an expenditure plan could be approved when the Legislature reconvenes in December 2020.

Agreement for Shared Stewardship of California's Forests and Rangelands

On August 13th, the State of California and the USDA Forest Service (USFS) unveiled a memorandum of understanding wherein the USFS committed to match the state's annual goal of managing 500,000 acres of forestland on the national forests. That would amount to a minimum of 1 million acres of forestland managed cross-jurisdictionally each year. Dubbed the Agreement for Shared Stewardship of California's Forests and Rangelands, the agreement outlines six core principles to improve state-federal forest health collaboration:

- Prioritize public safety;
- Use science to guide forest management;
- Coordinate land management across jurisdictions;
- Increase the scale and pace of forest management projects;
- Remove barriers that slow project approvals; and,
- Work closely with all stakeholders, including tribal communities, environmental groups, academia and timber companies.

While there is still much work to be done on California's national forests, the agreement is a step in the right direction in keeping the state and the USFS working together to better manage federal lands.

Staff Recommendation

RCRC will continue to update the RCRC Board of Directors on the state's activities on forest health and wildfire prevention as the Administration and Legislature continue to map out their plans into 2020.

Attachments

- RCRC Letter of Support on Assembly Bill 1659 (Bloom)
- Agreement for Shared Stewardship of California's Forests and Rangelands Memorandum of Understanding