



To: Members of the RCRC Board of Directors
From: Staci Heaton, Acting Vice President Governmental Affairs
Date: April 26, 2021
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. The year 2020 saw the most devastating wildfire season in California's modern history with more than 9,000 wildfires burning more than 4.3 million acres of land, and the state's precipitation levels so far this winter have not promised much hope for a better wildfire scenario in 2021.

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.

Issue

Wildfire and Forest Resilience Expenditure Plan

After weeks of negotiations, Governor Gavin Newsom, in concert with Senate President pro Tempore Toni Atkins and Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon, announced a \$536 million funding plan for wildfire prevention, forest management and restoration, home hardening and community fire mitigation efforts, and woody biomass utilization that will be allocated in the current budget year before the start of the 2021 wildfire season. The funds include \$125 million in Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) dollars to fulfill the Legislature's second year of commitments under Senate Bill 901 (Dodd, 2018), which promised five consecutive years of \$200 million annual appropriations from the GGRF for forest health programs. Funding in the plan includes:

- \$155 million to CAL FIRE for state forest health programs;
- \$123 million to CAL FIRE for local community fire prevention grants;

- \$25 million to CAL FIRE and CalOES for programs to assist homeowners with fire prevention retrofits (home hardening);
- \$2 million to CAL FIRE to fortify defensible space inspection activities;
- \$20 million to the Sierra Nevada Conservancy to implement projects in high fire risk areas;
- \$16 million for the Climate Catalyst Fund to help stimulate industries with low-interest finance for low carbon projects and programs such as woody biomass utilization or methane capture technologies;
- \$3 million to the Governor's Office of Planning and Research to develop strategies to encourage the use and development of new wood products; and,
- \$6 million to CAL FIRE and the Workforce Development Board to help develop the state's forest health and wildfire prevention workforce.

A substantial portion of the funding will be available in some form to local agencies for a wide variety of local fire prevention programs and projects, and the Governor is expected to announce an additional \$464 million in 2021-22 funding year allocations in his May Revision for a total of \$1 billion in spending on wildfire prevention and forest resilience programs.

The Governor's official announcement on the Wildfire and Forest Resilience Plan can be viewed on his website here: <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2021/04/13/governor-newsom-signs-landmark-536-million-wildfire-package-accelerating-projects-to-protect-high-risk-communities/>

Governor's Forest Management Task Force

In concert with the Expenditure Plan, Governor Newsom also announced the relaunch of the Governor's Forest Management Task Force, which will feature a new collaborative leadership structure utilizing experts at all levels of government, including RCRC Chair Supervisor Stacy Corless (Mono County). The Task Force was initially formed in 2018 as a follow-up to the Tree Mortality Task Force to implement the provisions of the state's Forest Carbon Plan. The relaunch of the Task Force will focus on implementing the *California's Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan*, released in January 2021, in an attempt to make better progress than the state has achieved on the *Forest Carbon Plan*. RCRC's continued involvement in Task Force leadership will serve to hold state and federal agencies accountable for their part in implementing the Action Plan, as well as acting as a mechanism for member counties to provide input to the Task Force. The next full Task Force meeting is scheduled for May 20, 2021.

The Governor's announcement including the new structure of the Task Force can be viewed on his website here: <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2021/04/08/governor-newsom-tours-sierra-fuel-break-highlights-agreement-with-legislative-leaders-on-536-million-wildfire-package/>

Subsequent to the Governor's announcement, Senator John Laird amended his Senate Bill 456 to codify several provisions of the Action Plan and require the Task Force to report annually to the Legislature on its progress in implementing the strategies contained therein. Senator Laird is working with the Director of the Task Force on the bill, and RCRC plans to support the legislation as it moves through the process.

RCRC Wildfire Prevention and Response Package

RCRC staff continues to work with various committees and members of the Legislature on pieces included in the Wildfire Prevention and Response Package. The three bills RCRC currently has in print and their status are as follows:

- Assembly Bill 1431 (Frazier) – Codifies the numerous goals and commitments for fuels treatment and vegetation management by the state as established in the 2018 Forest Carbon Plan and requires an annual progress report to the Legislature. AB 1431 is set for hearing in the Assembly Natural Resources Committee on Wednesday, April 28 and is expected to pass.
- Assembly Bill 1154 (Patterson) – Exempts from CEQA egress route projects undertaken by a public agency that are recommended by the State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection for community fire safety mitigation. AB 1154 will not be heard in the Assembly Natural Resources Committee due to restrictions on the number of bills being heard per author but could be revived in the 2022 Legislative session.
- Assembly Bill 1458 (Frazier) – Exempts projects approved by a state or local agency to mitigate the threat of wildfire from lake and streambed alteration permitting requirements. AB 1458 will be made a two-year bill to work with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife to narrow the scope of the exemptions.

RCRC staff continues to work with additional authors to identify existing legislation where concepts from the Package could be included, as well as engaging on bond proposals and the State Budget process to incorporate policy adopted by the Board.

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 2021.