



CALIFORNIA
FARM BUREAU
FEDERATION

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD BY THE
CALIFORNIA FOREST WATERSHED ALLIANCE (CAFWA)**

SUBMITTED TO THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS

APRIL 23, 2015

Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Tsongas and Subcommittee Members, the California Forest and Watershed Alliance (CAFWA) is pleased to submit this statement for the record for the April 23, 2015 hearing. The California Forest Watershed Alliance (CAFWA) is a unique alliance of disparate interests including organizations that represent water, environment, local government, timber, and agricultural interests all dedicated to finding a solution to California's ever-growing forest health and fire risk issues. The members of CAFWA, the Association of California Water Agencies, California Farm Bureau Federation, California Forestry Association, The Nature Conservancy California Chapter, and Rural County Representatives of California, are working together to seek new ways to promote proactive, science-based, and ecologically sound forest management practices that will reduce the risk of destructive megafires. Our goal is to protect our forests, our watersheds, our natural resources, our communities, and our local economies by accelerating the pace and scale of forest restoration.

Problem Statement: California forests, and other forests across the western United States, are at serious risk of large, high-severity wildfires that threaten lives, communities, water resources, wildlife habitat, and recreation. Although forest thinning and controlled burning are proven methods of reducing the risk of destructive megafires, the current pace and scale of forest management activities are inadequate given the scope of the problem. Our fire season is starting earlier and lasting longer with fires burning hotter than ever before. The growing cost of Forest Service fire suppression activities is negatively impacting the budget available to carry out critical restoration projects that protect forests and will begin to reduce firefighting costs over the long term. Severe drought in western states is exacerbating the decline of forests due to beetle bark infestations. There is an urgent need to restore our forests to a more resilient condition to protect our water resources, communities, and ecological values.

CAFWA Statement of Purpose: CAFWA believes healthy forests matter, not just to those living in and around those forests, but to all Californians who rely on clean water, clean air, and recreational opportunities. The impacts of forest wildfires on our water, energy, environment, and economy are felt by Californians throughout the state. It is time to take a serious look at current forest management policies, and to expand programs to improve forest health. The members of CAFWA are working together to seek new ways to promote proactive, science-based, and ecologically sound forest management practices that will reduce the risk of destructive megafires.



WHAT'S AT RISK?

Water Supply and Storage: Unhealthy forests and catastrophic wildfires affect the short and long term management and sustainability of water supplies. Wildfires in untreated areas cause burned areas to produce increased loads of sediment, ash and debris which cause reservoirs to fill up faster and reduce the life and storage capacity of reservoirs. Burned watersheds without trees and ground cover will result in snowpack melting more quickly. The resulting runoff will be less predictable, and less timely, increasing the difficulty of managing water supply throughout the west.

A recent study by The Nature Conservancy analyzed the potential water yield benefits from ecologically-based forest management in the northern Sierra Nevada and concluded that, if conducted at a landscape scale, fuels reduction in Sierra forests can potentially increase water yield by up to 6 percent. The report also found that it makes economic sense for water suppliers and utilities to invest in ecologically based thinning. Increased water that comes from thinning small trees could have significant economic benefits for downstream hydropower and water users, potentially off-setting between one-third and the full cost of the thinning.

Water Quality: Post-fire flooding has short and long-term impacts throughout watersheds which can extend far beyond the area of the fire. Ash, sediment, nitrogen and phosphorus can severely impact the taste and purity of drinking water, and negatively impact fish other aquatic species that require clear, oxygenated water. Increased sediment deposited behind reservoirs can impact the taste, clarity and odor of water as dissolved organics increase in the water, requiring elevated water treatment costs.

Ecosystem and Wildlife: Destructive megafires have numerous impacts on the ecosystem and wildlife. **These uncharacteristic megafires are causing very large high intensity patches of burned areas, and an ever-increasing trend in the overall percentage of burned area in high severity.** High severity fire can scorch soils, removing valuable organic carbon on the surface and in the soil profile, reducing its water holding capacity. When this occurs on slopes, the fire-sterilized soil is more likely to be carried down-slope, causing erosion and reversing hundreds to thousands of years of natural soil building processes. Wildlife habitat is also impacted by high severity fire as ecosystems shift from cool, canopy covered refugia to hot, exposed, and eroded barrens. Some wildlife can exploit these newly disturbed areas and brush lands, while others may need to migrate elsewhere to survive. Newly disturbed sites are also prone to invasion by non-native plant species that grow quickly and take advantage of recently released nutrients and bare, mineral soil. Additionally, some treeless patches are so severely sterilized that new sources of seeds do not exist and the area must be replanted, incurring greater costs and raising uncertainty about success in a continuing drought.



OPPORTUNITIES

Unfortunately, fuels reduction projects in overgrown forests continue to face numerous obstacles. Despite partnerships between stakeholders and federal, state and local governments, and science that clearly demonstrates the benefits of fuels reduction projects, the pace and scale of proactive forest management is not nearly keeping up with the increased size and severity of wildfires in our western forests. CAFWA believes there are opportunities to help accelerate forest restoration and is undertaking the following actions:

- Building a diverse, bipartisan, urban-rural coalition in California to advocate for increasing the pace and scale of ecologically-based active management in California's forests and watersheds.
- Communicating the importance of California's healthy forests by emphasizing the multiple values that they provide, especially with respect to water resources.
- Pursuing increased funding and new funding sources for forest management from federal, state, and private sources.
- Advocating for policy and legislative reforms that will promote ecologically sound forest restoration.
- Advancing monitoring and research to improve the state of scientific knowledge to better direct future land management decisions.

With respect to funding forest management and fuels reduction, we believe there are several steps that Congress should consider. First, stable, efficient, and responsible wildfire suppression funding is needed. The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act would fund wildfire disasters like other natural disasters, ensuring that agencies do not raid vital conservation programs when suppression funds run out. This would bring up-front funding certainty for fire fighters and stability for forest health activities. The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act will resolve inefficiency and reduce the devastating impacts that fire transfers have had on people, water and wildlife.

Second, Congress should build upon the link between healthy forests and watersheds and downstream water quality and quantity by funding research and demonstration projects. Such funding could be directed to the following programs:

1. Increased funding for the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Act to be directed to fuels reduction and forest restoration projects in CFLRA project areas experiencing significant drought and high wildfire risk, with accompanying research on the effects of such activities on water supply and water quality.

2. Increased funding for USFS and the Bureau of Reclamation to work together, pursuant to the Western Watershed Enhancement Partnership, to implement fuels reduction projects on national forest lands experiencing significant drought and high wildfire risk, accompanied by research on potential water quality and water supply benefits of such activities.



3. Additional funding for other large landscape, collaborative efforts to increase resilience and disaster preparedness, accompanied by a robust research program to study the environmental impacts, including water quality and water supply impacts, of landscape scale treatments in areas experiencing significant drought and high wildfire risk, with priority given to projects with significant matching funds.

Finally, Congress should consider providing additional direction and incentives to the Forest Service to undertake fuels reduction and forest management activities on a landscape scale. This could include a combination of (1) financial incentives for landscape-scale forest management, possibly tied to a job-creation program to bolster rural economies and provide more certainty over multiple years, and (2) regulatory incentives. Regulatory incentives may include providing direction to the Forest Service to use existing authorities to encourage management of the national forests on a landscape scale, including innovative approaches to complying with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) that would meet the policy's goals while expediting ecologically-based forest management. This approach might include, for example, increased use of programmatic Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) that consider environmental impacts and alternatives at a whole-watershed scale while allowing the Forest Service to implement site-specific projects without additional extensive NEPA review, which may significantly decrease per-acre analysis costs and expedite project implementation.

CONCLUSION

Accelerating forest restoration and hazardous fuels reduction is essential to securing multiple benefits from our National Forests. These benefits include wildlife habitat, clean water supplies, recreation, forest products, carbon sequestration, and healthy rural communities and economies.

Inaction on forest health is contributing to catastrophic megafires. CAFWA encourages Congress and the U.S. Forest Service to quickly address the known budgetary and other obstacles that are contributing to this crisis.



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