



## **Commentary: Ready or Not, Wildfires Are Coming**

Coalition Offers Preparedness Tips

By Justin Caporusso, Chair – California Forest Watershed Alliance (CAFWA).

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California is home to nearly 40 million residents, the world's 5th largest economy, and a collection of cutting-edge and entrepreneurial leaders in the arena of public policy. These are traits that most states, and many nations, would gladly call their own. However, the glistening shine of the Golden State cannot hide the reality that California is also home to a devastating wildfire epidemic. An epidemic that has dramatically threatened lives, property, the air we breathe, and California's water supply.

In years past, state officials publicized wildfire preparedness and prevention events throughout the state, with the first full week of May eventually being declared, "Wildfire Awareness Week." That was then and this is now. Our "new normal" – a year-round, relentless wildfire season – compelled officials to swap out "Awareness" with "Preparedness." When it comes to wildfires in California, it is no longer a matter of "if" they strike, but rather when they do, and how severe the damage will be to our forests and our communities.

Previously, many Californians might have observed the devastation as they watched and read news reports about wildfires breaking out in remote areas of the state, but that level of detachment is no longer possible. If we've learned anything from the catastrophic wildfires of the last decade, especially the last couple of years, it's that wildfires materialize quickly, spread rapidly, and can end up on your doorstep before you know it. Millions of Californians are at risk and none of us can afford to play the role of idle observer any longer. The loss of lives and property, coupled with the impacts on our water, energy, environment, and economy take a debilitating toll on our communities, which can take years to recover.

So how do we confront wildfires? The only way we can: preparedness. "Wildfire Preparedness Week" provides a platform for officials to educate the public on what the state is doing to prepare for wildfires, and what Californians can do on their own to complement the state's efforts.

Let's start with defensible space, the first line of defense for property and structures. Creating and maintaining defensible space around commercial and

residential properties can dramatically increase the chance of structures surviving a wildfire. Furthermore, this is a technique that creates a safe zone for firefighters to fight wildfires as safely as possible when protecting homes. The creation and maintenance of proper defensible space is the responsibility of individual property owners, as well an easy and effective means of defending their properties.

Fuel breaks, in coordination with ecologically based thinning and prescribed fires, are also critical tools that can improve forest health and resilience and protect communities from wildfire. A fuel break is a wide strip of land where the density of trees and vegetation has been reduced to slow or stop the progress of a wildfire. Rivers, lakes, and ridgelines are examples of natural fuel breaks, however, they can also be constructed. Two shaded forest fuel break projects near Paradise helped save Stirling City and a local elementary school from the devastating Camp Fire.

The stark reality is that no amount of preparedness will guarantee our safety, but preparedness is what we have at our disposal and it can certainly be the difference between life and death.

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*Founded in 2014, the California Forest Watershed Alliance (CAFWA) was formed to advocate for increasing the pace and scale of ecologically sound forest restoration practices that can help reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and promote healthier, more resilient forests across California. CAFWA is a nonpartisan, urban-rural coalition representing water interests, local governments, the conservation community, agriculture, and the forestry sector. CAFWA's diverse interests and breadth of experience uniquely position the coalition to serve as a thoughtful leader in the development of policy recommendations for improving the health of California's forests.*