

Commentary: California Coalition Outlines Wildfire Policy Recommendations Following Governor-Elect's Swift Action

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Less than 48 hours after being elected the 40th Governor of California, Lt. Governor Gavin Newsom declared a State of Emergency in Butte County due to the Camp Fire. As of Nov. 28, 2018, 88 lives have been lost, more than 150 are still listed as missing, more than 151,000 acres have burned, and more than 15,000 residences and other structures have been destroyed, making it the most destructive wildfire in California's history. Impacts from the Camp Fire were felt throughout the state as smoke-filled skies caused the air quality in Northern California to be rated the worst in the world.

Many factors have contributed to the tragic wildfires in recent years, including forests and woodlands crowded with brush and small trees from decades of fire suppression. Fortunately, there is something we can do about this problem – ecological thinning and controlled burns are proven, cost-effective approaches to reduce wildfire risk and promote healthier, more resilient forests. The California Legislature has provided a glimmer of hope for the Governor-Elect through Senate Bill 901 (Dodd).

Governor Jerry Brown signed SB 901 earlier this year. This landmark legislation addresses some of the underlying issues that have led to the megafires the state has experienced in recent years. SB 901 provides a significant investment in forest health, fire prevention, and fuels reduction, and highlights the importance and value of healthy forests to California as a whole. Now that the state has recognized the need, it's time for the incoming administration and Legislature to develop strategic policy solutions that begin to reverse the unhealthy conditions found within and around California's forests. SB 901 is an important initial step to mitigate California's wildfire risk and to reverse decades of forest mismanagement and fire suppression efforts.

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.

CAFWA supports the \$200 million annual funding for forest health, fire prevention, and fuels reduction provided by SB 901, and urges the California Department of Forestry

and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) to support projects that use ecological thinning and prescribed fire to promote forest health and resilience. Priority should be given to projects that utilize a comprehensive, “all lands” approach covering large landscapes and all ownerships within California, including local, state, private, and federal lands. Priority should also be given to community preparedness, including grants for vegetation management and creation of defensible space around homes.

Healthy forests matter, not just to those living in and around those forests, but to all Californians who rely on clean water, clean air, recreational opportunities, and rural jobs. The impacts of wildfires on our water, energy, environment, and economy are felt by Californians throughout the state. Moreover, each year the government and its people spend billions of dollars, sacrifice, and countless hours into combating climate change only to have those efforts undermined by the enormous carbon emissions from megafires. SB 901 is a bipartisan, statewide response to better improve the sustainability, resiliency, and management of our state’s forests, and CAFWA is encouraged by Governor-Elect Newsom’s swift action related to the recent wildfires in both Northern and Southern California. CAFWA stands ready to partner with the Newsom Administration to increase the pace and scale of ecologically based forest management and wildlife risk reduction throughout the state.

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