

Press Release: Governor's Task Force Outlines Actions to Reduce Wildfire Risk, Improve Health of Forests and Wildlands 1-8-21

Description

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Governorâ??s Task Force Outlines Actions to Reduce Wildfire Risk, Improve Health of Forests and Wildlands

Comprehensive Strategy Aligns with \$1 Billion Investment Proposed in Governorâ??s Budget

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

January 8, 2021

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SACRAMENTO â?? Following the most destructive wildfire season in Californiaâ??s recorded history, the Governorâ??s Forest Management Task Force today issued a comprehensive action plan to reduce wildfire risk for vulnerable communities, improve the health of forests and wildlands and accelerate action to combat climate change.

The [Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan](#) sets a broadly supported strategy to increase the pace and scale of forest and wildland management to meet the stateâ??s target of completing projects on 500,000 acres annually by 2025 and expanding the use of prescribed fire, particularly on state-owned lands. The plan calls for achieving these goals largely through regional strategies tailored to the environmental conditions, risks and priorities in each area.

The plan also centers on building a large network of fuel breaks around vulnerable communities, expanding home hardening, defensible space and preparedness planning to create wildfire-adapted communities, and sustaining the economic vitality of rural forested areas.

Actions outlined in the plan align with a \$1 billion investment included in Governor Gavin Newsomâ??s proposed 2021-2022 budget. This proposed funding would advance key priorities, including \$323 million in early actions to protect communities, reduce risk of large, catastrophic wildfires and jumpstart economic recovery in rural communities.

Wildfires burned over 4 million acres across California in 2020, more than the 2017 and 2018 fire seasons combined. Hotter, drier conditions in the stateâ??s forests driven by climate change and the consequences of a century-old legacy of fire suppression have disrupted natural wildfire behavior and generated unparalleled risk of catastrophic wildfire across landscapes from coastal redwoods to chaparral and oak woodlands.

â??Catastrophic wildfires represent a severe and worsening threat that requires bold action,â?? California Secretary for Natural Resources Wade Crowfoot said. â??To meet this multigenerational challenge, we need to shift our paradigm and invest in a scaled-up, cohesive strategy built on science

to restore landscapes and protect communities.â?•

â??Fire has been part of Californiaâ??s landscape since time immemorial,â?• California Secretary for Environmental Protection Jared Blumenfeld said. â??Our critical partnerships with Tribes across the state have taught us that our relationship with forests requires a deep and holistic engagement which at its core incorporates traditional ecological knowledge and modern science to protect the health of Californiaâ??s most vulnerable communities.â?•

The Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan builds on the [Agreement for Shared Stewardship of Californiaâ??s Forest and Rangelands](#) signed last summer by Governor Newsom and U.S. Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen. The agreement calls for a science-based long-term strategy to reduce wildfire risks, restore watersheds, protect habitat and biological diversity, and help the state meet its climate objectives.

The action plan is the product of a two-year collaborative effort and aligns the stateâ??s strategy with other federal, local, tribal, regional and private organizations. It also links the stateâ??s wildfire resilience programs to its climate, biodiversity and economic development goals.

The Governorâ??s proposed budget supports proposed investments in key action plan priorities:

- \$512 million to increase landscape scale resilience in our forests and natural landscapes, including through increased use of prescribed fire and funding for tribes and small landowners.
- \$335 million to complete at least 45-60 strategic fuel break projects each year over the next several years and grants to support local wildfire plans and projects.
- \$38 million to harden and protect fire-vulnerable communities.
- \$39 million to ensure our predictive models and investments in wildfire resilience are based on the best available science.
- \$76 million to expand economic and job opportunities through the Climate Catalyst Fundâ??s low-interest lending program, the California Conservation Corps workforce programs, and forest management job training.

Federal, local, regional and non-governmental organization representatives voiced support for the action plan and the collaboration it represents:

Randy Moore, Regional Forester, Pacific Southwest Region of the U.S. Forest Service: â??On behalf of the U.S. Forest Service and the Pacific Southwest Region, I commend the collaboration and work of the Forest Management Task Force during the past two years. This work is a testament to our collective commitment to shared stewardship in California. We have made progress on all lands, but much work remains to be done. This action plan provides a framework for community fire protection and forest resilience. With all of our partners, the Forest Service is committed to implement the plan, which will benefit people and economies in rural and urban communities while also addressing the effects of climate change.â?•

James Gore, President, California State Association of Counties: â??With wildfires setting catastrophic records year after year, the time is long overdue to make substantial, sustainable changes to our forest management practices. We applaud the progress that this report represents, and our counties support the regional approach to building wildfire resiliency and improving the safety of our communities.â?•

Jay Ziegler, Director of External Affairs and Policy, The Nature Conservancy in California:

“Following a record 4.2 million acres burned in 2020, exacerbated by a changing climate, we need urgent investment in proactive measures to save lives and empower conditions necessary to improve wildfire resilience across our state. Governor Newsom’s Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan is absolutely critical to reducing the risk that severe wildfires pose to our communities, air quality, wildlife and water supplies. We look forward to working with the Administration and the Legislature to implement the Plan and shape a resilient future for people and nature.”

Kate Dargan, Co-Chair, California Fire Safe Council: “The California Fire Safe Council has been a longtime champion of wildfire mitigation and partner with local communities to build wildfire resiliency. We applaud the Governor and the Forest Management Task Force for putting together a comprehensive approach to this problem and look forward to working with these partners to make it happen faster for California people and places.”

John Battles, Professor of Forest Ecology, UC Berkeley: “California’s Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan relies on the best available science to address the pressing forest and wildfire crisis in the state. At the same time, it recognizes that we are confronting novel ecological conditions under a changing climate. Thus, it is not only a call to action but also a charge to understand the forces that threaten our forests and to translate this understanding into effective management and policy.”

The Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan builds on significant progress to date by the Newsom Administration and the State Legislature to tackle California’s forest health and wildfire crisis:

- Surged CAL FIRE’s ranks by spending \$26 million to hire 393 seasonal firefighters before the peak fire season in 2019, and 858 new seasonal firefighters in 2020.
- Deployed the National Guard to work on critical fuel projects.
- Completed 35 emergency fuel breaks to protect 200 of California’s most vulnerable communities, which played a critical role during the 2020 fire season.
- Reduced the CEQA review timeline for wildfire prevention and landscape health projects from two years to several months by conducting an environmental review on over 20 million acres of non-federal land.
- Delivered hundreds of millions in grant dollars to communities and environmental partners to execute wildfire and landscape health programs.
- Returned CAL FIRE’s fire engine staffing toward historical levels, investing \$67.5 million to buy 13 additional fully staffed year-round fire engines, in addition to heavy fire equipment operators.
- Expanded CAL FIRE’s aviation fleet with \$127.2 million in new aircraft equipped to meet the challenges associated with more severe wildfire activity, including C-130H air tankers and 12 Black Hawk helicopters capable of nighttime firefighting operations.
- Modified state rules on procuring new technology to improve opportunities to place state-of-the-art wildfire technology into the hands of incident commanders within a year. This new technology can project the direction, size and distance a wildfire may travel based on real-time weather, terrain and fuels conditions.
- Partnered with the federal government on a satellite-based wildfire detection system and secured authorization for the California National Guard to fly infrared-equipped Unmanned Aerial Systems to support firefighting missions. Additionally, the state budget included funding for an additional 100 infrared fire monitoring cameras on remote communications towers to help dispatchers and firefighters identify and confirm wildfires’ locations.

- Secured \$25 million annually to fund city and county firefighting engines and crews to be able to pre-deploy in strategic locations and respond to breaking fires.
- Launched the state's \$50 million emergency preparedness campaign to increase awareness and build resiliency in vulnerable communities at high risk for wildfires and other disasters.

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Date Created

January 8, 2021

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