

Separate Funding Needed for Fighting Wildfires and Managing Forests

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Patricia Megason, Executive Vice President, RCRC

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The first week of May has traditionally represented the beginning of wildfire season in California, with events such as Wildfire Awareness Week aimed at raising awareness of dangers poised to come. However, the ongoing drought, continued mismanagement of forest lands, and a nonsensical funding formula for prevention and suppression have resulted in a year-round wildfire season in California. Add that to this year's bark beetle infestation and tree mortality issue, and the results greatly compound the risk of catastrophic wildfires this season.

California has experienced several consecutive years of record drought, resulting in unprecedented tree mortality and insect infestations. In the Sierra Nevada, home to a majority of the state's watersheds, nearly 30 million trees were lost to insect and disease die-off in 2015, and it is anticipated another 30 million trees will be lost this year.

In October, citing risks to public safety due to falling trees, fire and insufficient county or municipal resources to address the problem, Gov. Jerry Brown issued a state of emergency regarding tree mortality, and ordered state resources to address the catastrophe.

The governor simultaneously released a letter calling upon U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack to partner with California in deploying federal resources to provide relief and assistance to homeowners and communities adjacent to federal lands.

Tree mortality is affecting safety of residents in rural communities and threatening water sources for all Californians. Dead and dying trees dramatically increase the risk of large wildfires and create public safety hazards around communities, along roadways and in recreational areas.

The bark beetle epidemic is not going to end until California experiences either several consecutive years of normal rainfall or the beetles run out of trees to attack, and it will take a concerted effort at local, state and federal levels to combat it. The best solution is the removal of infested trees, thinning overstocked stands of trees, and improving the overall health of California's forested landscapes and watersheds.

Reducing the effects and severity of wildfires that have plagued California over the past decade is essential. Wildfires continue to threaten the state due to the lack of active management on lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service. In the past two decades, the Forest Service has been forced to shift away from fire prevention and forest-health activities to focus more of its limited resources on fire suppression. Ultimately, this system has created a large backlog of needed prevention and forest-health projects that continue to go unfunded.

A system needs to be created whereby wildfire disaster response is funded in a way similar to that of other natural disasters, such as hurricanes and floods. The Federal Emergency Management Agency pays for response to those types of disasters out of a fund that is separate and apart from the costs of any preventive actions, and separate from any post-disaster cleanup or mitigation of future disasters. Wildfires, however, have never been funded in this two-part way, leading to “fire borrowing,” in which prevention and cleanup funds are swept into funding the response to the disaster rather than used toward prevention.

California’s forests serve as a source of clean water, clean air and unsurpassed recreational opportunities for the world’s citizens – not just those living in California’s rural communities – and the harm from catastrophic wildfire is equally widespread.

The correlation between climbing suppression costs, reduced fuel-reduction activities and mismanaged watersheds is quantifiable and real, and it is time for a heightened focus on the health of our forests and watersheds as a first step to helping reduce the severity of California’s wildfires.

Patricia Megason is executive vice president of the Rural County Representatives of California. Contact her at pmegason@rcrcnet.org.

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