



California Forest Watershed Alliance (CAFWA)

An alliance of urban and rural organizations dedicated to the restoration and improvement of California's watersheds and forests.

November 14, 2014

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
United States Senate
331 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

RE: S. 1875 – Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2013: **SUPPORT**

Dear Senator Feinstein:

On behalf of the California Forest Watershed Alliance (CAFWA), we are writing to thank you for your co-sponsorship of S. 1875, the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2013 (WDFFA), and your leadership on the issue of forestry and fire. 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 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 natural resources, and our local economies by accelerating the pace and scale of forest health and fuels reduction projects and post-fire restoration.

The WDFFA would prevent so-called "fire borrowing," or the shift of funds from other accounts, including those that pay for other fire prevention and forest health activities at the Departments of Interior and the Department of Agriculture, to wildfire suppression budgets. Hundreds of millions are "borrowed" in bad fire years to fund fire suppression efforts on federal forest lands. ***This is not a practical way to fund a predictable expense.***

CAFWA and its individual members are in full support of the WDFFA, which protects funding for fire prevention activities by shifting funding for the largest fire suppression efforts into a separate account. Recently, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released information showing how fire borrowing has negatively affected funding for wildfire preparedness, forest restoration, and other activities in nearly every state across the country because wildfire suppression budgets did not fully cover firefighting costs. In California, hazardous fuels reduction projects, the awarding of local stewardship contracts, and timber projects, as well as long-term restoration activities were all deferred or eliminated.

The current funding system leaves fire prevention and other forest management activities shortchanged. The Rim Fire was a devastating example of how insufficient forest management and fire prevention activities can create essentially un-fightable wildfires. With the ongoing drought disaster, and large, current, ongoing fires in the state, it's not difficult to see why California's 2014 fire season burned over 500,000 acres including over 200 homes in Weed, California. Without changing the funding structure, disaster-level megafires will become more and more prevalent as the amount of funding allocated to prevention projects will become a smaller and smaller percentage of federal land management agencies' budgets. Since 2000, these agencies have exhausted their funds to fight emergency fires eight times.

Other natural disasters are funded in a way similar to that proposed by the W DFA, such that prevention funding and post-disaster mitigation funding are not detrimentally affected by the cost of actual disaster response. The W DFA does this without affecting the current structure of the Stafford Act. A new funding mechanism that allows dollars to be set aside ahead in time to pay for the largest and most costly wildfire disasters would minimize budget uncertainty, and would incentivize the land management agency in slating and performing prevention and forest health projects.

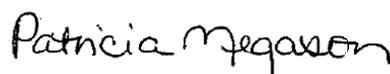
The sooner the W DFA, or a similar change to the fiscal structure of preventing and fighting wildfires, is made, the sooner the work to improve the health of our forests can truly begin. As you know, our nation's forests are vital to the health of watersheds, air quality, wildlife habitat, and as an economic driver in some of our poorest and most rural areas through tourism, recreation, and sustainable forestry.

Again, thank you for your co-sponsorship of this legislation, and your leadership on forest management issues. We hope there may be things you can do to assure this legislation is acted on by the Congress during the lameduck session. We look forward to working with you to ensure healthy forests and adequate funding for firefighting and fire prevention needs.

Sincerely,



Tim Quinn, Executive Director
Association of California Water Agencies



Patricia Megason, Executive Vice President
Rural County Representatives of California



Rayne Pegg, Manager Federal Policy Division
California Farm Bureau Federation



Nina Kapoor, Vice President of Legislative Affairs
California Forestry Association



David Edelson, Sierra Nevada Project Director
The Nature Conservancy, California Chapter