

## **California Farm Bureau Federation Commentary: Disastrous Wildfires Show Need for Improved Policies**

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September 20, 2017 - By Erin Huston - As dozens of wildfires burn across California and other Western states, the pressure ratchets up on Congress to take long-awaited action to reform federal policy on forestry and wildfire prevention.

During the past week, two members of the Trump administration responded to the escalating crisis.

First, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke announced plans to adopt more-aggressive practices to prevent and combat wildfires on federal land. He promised "robust fuels reduction and pre-suppression techniques," and directed managers and superintendents of Interior Department units to use the full range of existing authorities to reduce fuels.

Two days later, Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said wildland fire-suppression costs for the current fiscal year had topped \$2 billion, making 2017 the most expensive year on record. He renewed his call for Congress to fix the way it funds U.S. Department of Agriculture fire-suppression activities.

The current, ineffective method is called "fire borrowing." USDA has to borrow money from the fire-prevention part of the Forest Service budget to pay for fighting existing fires. This could change, if Congress treated wildfires the same as other disasters—such as the hurricanes that have done so much damage in Texas and Florida this summer. Money to respond to those disasters will come from emergency funds, but such funds aren't available for wildfire response.

Farm Bureau has long advocated for an end to "fire borrowing," as well as for legislation that accelerates forest restoration and enhances hazardous-fuel reduction. To address some of these goals, we've turned our attention to the upcoming rewrite of federal agricultural policy: the 2018 Farm Bill.

A few weeks ago, Farm Bureau hosted a group of timber operators, foresters, private landowners and others involved in forestry, to meet with Rep. Doug LaMalfa, R-Richvale, about forestry issues in the farm bill. For example, those of us in the meeting agreed that the new farm bill should streamline processes the Forest Service uses after

a wildfire to remove dead trees more quickly.

Farm bill programs can help in fire prevention, for example by allowing declaration of emergencies due to insect or disease infestations and including removal of dead vegetation as part of reforestation activities. The farm bill can also encourage use of biomass power plants to reduce the fuel load in forests, and direct conservation and research funds toward forest management.

Support for improved forest management has broadened as wildfires have consumed more land. The California Farm Bureau Federation participates in an urban-rural coalition called the California Forest Watershed Alliance, or CAFWA, which brings together water districts, local governments, conservation organizations, agricultural and forestry groups. Coalition members include the Association of California Water Agencies, California Forestry Association, Rural County Representatives of California, the Nature Conservancy and CFBF.

In a list of recommendations for the 2018 Farm Bill, CAFWA focuses on a comprehensive solution to forest management—including wildfire prevention, suppression and restoration—in order to leave forests more resilient against disease, drought and wildfire. Among other things, that means more and faster forest thinning, hazardous-fuel removal, creation of firebreaks and other activities.

Our coalition supports projects that accelerate large landscape restoration, and supports expanded Good Neighbor Authority, which helps federal land managers enter into collaborative agreements with state governments to enhance forest management.

Other strategies the farm bill could support include technical assistance for landowners, secure funding for key conservation programs and grant funding to offset the cost of transporting wood to biomass plants.

And, of course, the CAFWA coalition supports an end to "fire borrowing" and a comprehensive solution to address the increasing cost of wildfire suppression.

As you can see, wildfire prevention and forest management represent a multi-faceted issue—and we need to pay attention to all of those facets in order to achieve the goal of healthy public and private forestland. Some factors that increase wildfire danger, such as long drought, may be beyond our control—but that just means we have to be more active in controlling the factors we can control.

We've seen the alternative: Lack of active forest management has created danger and

severe economic hardship for Californians who live and work in rural communities.

Wildfires have burned millions of acres, endangered lives, displaced families, ruined wildlife habitat, damaged rural economies and degraded watersheds—among many other awful results. The only good thing that could come from any of this would be if Congress finally acts to end "fire borrowing" and takes other actions to reform forestry policy.

Farm Bureau will do all we can to make sure that happens. As discussions about the 2018 Farm Bill progress, be sure to let your member of Congress know that you support programs that restore balance to our forest and to the way we pay to fight wildfires.

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