



California Forestry Association

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California Forestry and Wildfire

California has seen dramatic increases in severe wildfire driven by an uncharacteristic abundance of forest fuel. High-intensity wildfires deprive soils of nutrients, expose topsoil to erosion, destroy wildlife habitat and degrade air quality for thousands of miles. Post-fire rains degrade watersheds and increase the cost of delivering clean drinking water to millions of Californians. California taxpayers now spend more than \$1 billion annually to fight wildfire.

Thinning forests and managing resources sustainably can reduce wildfire severity up to 60 percent. With forests dangerously overgrown – many Sierra Nevada forests are packed with up to 10 times more trees than Gold Rush Era forests – mechanical harvesting and a forestry infrastructure capable of making productive use of forest resources must be part of California’s long-term wildfire crisis solution.



Fuel Loads

A century of aggressive fire suppression and decades of harvest restrictions have created forestlands dense with unnatural fuel loads. Roughly 10 million California acres stand at high risk of catastrophic wildfire, choked with ladder fuels that quickly turn ground fires to crown fires, the most devastating type of fire. Today’s high-intensity wildfires can feature 200-foot walls of flame and reach temperatures in excess of 2,000°F. Of the elements in the “fire triangle” – fuel, temperature and oxygen – fuel is the only one we can manage.

Air quality

Wildfire smoke can pollute the air for thousands of miles and aggravate asthma and other medical conditions. Chemical reactions in wildfire smoke often cause significant increases in ozone levels. While Sacramento was shrouded in smoke during the 2004 Freds and Power fires, Trinity County residents endured 87 unhealthy air days from wildfire in 2008. The 2009 Station Fire wreaked havoc with Southern California air quality for weeks.

Greenhouse Gases

Wildfire has become a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions in the state. Managing forests to prevent catastrophic wildfire lowers emissions by reducing the amount of carbon burned, and helps keep carbon removed from the atmosphere by trees through photosynthesis fixed in the forest. Allowing forests to grow dense and succumb to wildfire can undo broad-based efforts to reduce California’s carbon emissions.

Wildlife

Catastrophic wildfire has become the biggest threat to spotted owl habitat and has devastating effects on wildlife and aquatic species habitat. While smoke inhalation is the top wildlife-killer during intense blazes, perhaps the most significant post-fire impact comes from scorched soils that bury spawning gravels during post-fire rain.