Fire Prevention and Forest Management

Key Initiatives – Spring 2020

Introduction

Covid-19 and its impact on California has naturally shifted statewide priorities. Public health and the economic impacts of Coronavirus appropriately demand our attention. The challenge for California will be the management of other imperatives including education, infrastructure, and wildfire prevention. Maintaining our current efforts in forest health while considering enhancements will be critical. The California Forestry Association respectfully suggests that the following short list be considered as key initiatives during this time.

Hazardous Fuels Treatments and Biomass

As forest management projects continue to create defensible space and shaded fuel breaks to protect communities and property, the non-commercial material that is residual needs to be removed from the forest. Leaving that material in place is more harmful to the environment than turning it into energy. Long term, gasification of biomass has promise, but incentives would be necessary to develop this approach.

Recommendation:

In the short-term the expansion of the definition of hazardous fuels under the BioRAM program would help facilitate the reduction of vegetative fuels on thousands of acres, thus aiding the state in meeting the goal of treating 500,000 acres annually.

Good Neighbor Authority

Recognizing the need for the federal government and states to work together to address the forest health and wildfire crisis, Congress included the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) in the 2014 Farm Bill. GNA currently allows the state, counties, and tribes to sign agreements with the federal government authorizing the sharing of funds, staff and other resources across jurisdictional boundaries. To date, California has entered into GNA agreements on a limited basis.

Recommendation:

The state should expand its use of the Good Neighbor Authority by launching a formal GNA program, with dedicated staff and enhanced funding, to accelerate the pace and scale of ecologically based forest management on national forest lands.

The state program would:

1. Establish a legislative framework for GNA implementation that would include priorities for investment of state funds and resources. This framework would prioritize projects that are landscape scale, ecologically based to improve forest health and resilience and reduce the risk of high-severity wildfire, supported by collaboration and partnership, and benefitting the state’s interests in clean air, clean water, and carbon storage.

2. Provide dedicated state staff to help the Forest Service and other partners develop, plan, and implement GNA projects. This could include helping with project design, environmental review, field surveys, contract management, and on-the-ground implementation of projects.
3. Create a revolving account dedicated to receiving funds from the state (and other sources) and expending program income. Any net income that the state receives through the GNA would be reinvested into future forest restoration projects under the GNA.
4. Provide seed funding to the state’s GNA account of $10 million from cap and trade revenues.

**Independent Contractors**

Our efforts at forest management to protect communities must be sustained. One challenge to this work is the lack of clarity regarding the employment status of two groups of licensed professionals – Registered Professional Foresters and Licensed Timber Operators. Registered Professional Foresters develop the plans to ensure that forest management efforts meet California’s environmental standards. Licensed Timber Operators carry out the work of forest thinning and the creation of shaded fuel breaks to protect communities. Clarifying the independent status of these licensed professionals will provide assurance that our efforts to protect communities from wildfire will continue.

**Recommendation:**

Exempt LTOs and RPFs from the ABC test so that the state’s wildfire abatement efforts are uninterrupted.

**Permit Processing**

AB 1492 (2012) established an “assessment” on the sale of lumber in California. The assessment is 1% of the sale price and this has been generating approximately $45 M per year. These assessment funds are deposited in the Timber Regulation and Forest Restoration Fund (TRFR). The timber industry supported this assessment as the proceeds were to be dedicated to the timely processing of Timber Harvest Plans. TRFR dollars can only be used to pay for:

- Reimbursement to the tax agency for administrative costs
- Support of the review of projects or permits necessary to conduct timber operations
- The Forest Improvement Program (administered by CalFire)
- Existing forest restoration grant programs
- Grants to local agencies responsible for fire prevention

In recent years TRFR funds have been tapped to pay for activities which were not necessarily envisioned when AB 1492 was adopted including funding mass timber activities.

An economic downturn will reduce the amount of dollars coming into TRFR.

**Recommendation:**

Dollars from TRFR need to be prioritized for permit review so that fire prevention and forest management projects can be implemented in a timely manner.

**Homeowner Firebreak**

Public Resources Code 4584 (m) provides a Timber Harvest Plan exemption for a homeowner to create a fuel reduction zone up to 300 feet from structures. This exemption sunsets on January 1, 2022. The homeowner fuel reduction exemption is a valuable tool to reduce wildfire risk.

**Recommendation:**

Remove the sunset.