

# Wildfires

## Adequate Fire Protection, Enforcing Space Rules Can Limit Damage

### Summary

#### Background

Periodic wildfires are a part of the natural cycle of forests. They serve to clear out dead or dying trees, diseased trees or plants, and remove forest debris, allowing younger, healthier trees and shrubs to grow. Good forestry management practices mimic nature by mechanically clearing out underbrush and other forest debris, as well as cutting and removing dead, infested or dying trees.

Environmental regulations protecting species and their habitats, however, have severely restricted the ability of forest landowners and forestry companies to manage their lands in a way that reduces fuel loads leading to wildfires.

There have been an increasing number of severe forest fires in the last couple of decades. Millions of acres of forested lands have become more vulnerable to wildfires due to increased fuel loading and prolonged drought.

Over time, more and more homes and commercial enterprises have been built on the urban fringe interfacing with forestlands. Small rural communities exist within forested areas of the state supported by tourism, recreation or the timber industry. Vacation and retirement homes dot the forest landscape. These structures are vulnerable to wildfires and the cost of fighting wildfires in these areas is increasingly costly. Newer structures built under current building codes requiring use of non-combustible materials are proving to be very fire resistant.

#### Current State/Federal Policy

The State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) classify lands where the financial responsibility of preventing and suppressing fires is primarily a state responsibility (SRAs). SRAs include lands covered by trees producing, or capable of producing, forest products. SRAs do not include federal-owned or -controlled land, or land within a city.

Cities and counties are responsible for structures within their boundaries. Currently, the payment of fire protection and emergency services costs is carefully balanced between federal, state and local fire departments through the use of mutual aid agreements. Whether a fire originates on wild lands or from a structure, a strong initial response through mutual aid agreements protects California resources against catastrophic damage.

#### Impact on Business

Uncontrolled wildfires are costly for business. Business structures, residences of employees and business owners are all at risk. Wildfires can cause disruptions in normal commerce for extended periods through road closures, water damage, poor air quality, erosion and lack of amenities. Unreasonably prohibiting development in certain areas of the state adversely affects the construction industry and further slows the economy, hurting Main Street businesses and causing further job losses.

Forestland owners suffer loss of long-term investments when their trees burn. It takes many years to grow a replacement crop, especially if owners are unable to clear the burned acres in a timely fashion due to strict forestry rules regarding salvage.

#### Anticipated Action

A variety of bills have been introduced over the last few years to provide more funding for fire suppression. They range in content from imposing an annual SRA fire protection benefit fee on each parcel of land in SRAs to requiring additional fire insurance policies for certain structures built on the urban fringe.

The most troublesome legislation created a restriction on the development of commercial or residential structures in certain areas of the state unless CAL FIRE approved. It placed local government in an untenable position of having to obtain approval from CAL FIRE for land use planning, which traditionally is a local government prerogative. There is every reason to expect that similar legislation will surface in 2009.

### CalChamber Position

The California Chamber of Commerce supports adequate fire suppression availability for all areas of the state, including the ability for forestland owners and timber companies to clear underbrush and other debris, as well as remove dead or dying trees. The CalChamber also supports more inspections and stricter enforcement of defensible space regulations and use of ignition-resistant landscaping where applicable.

## Wildfires (continued)

### Reasons for Position

- Mutual aid agreements are working to provide adequate fire protection.
- New building standards mandate use of non-combustible materials that have proven to significantly reduce fire risk.
- Stricter enforcement of defensible space regulations reduces fire damage to structures.
- Ignition-resistant landscaping is available and in use in vulnerable areas.

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January 2009