

# Committee on Resources

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**Testimony of Mike Chrisman  
Secretary, California Resources Agency  
Before the Committee on Resources  
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health  
U. S. House of Representatives**

**December 5, 2003  
Lake Arrowhead, California**

Chairman Pombo and Members of the Committee, on behalf of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee regarding the catastrophic wildfires that California experienced this fall. I also appreciate the great efforts of the Chairman and the entire Resources Committee in passing the Healthy Forest Act, which President Bush signed earlier this week.

The recent wildfires in Southern California have caused devastation on a scale not seen before in my lifetime. The fires burned 739,597 acres in Southern California. At the height of the fires, over 15,000 personnel were actively working to contain them. Sadly, 3,631 homes were burned to the ground. Another 36 commercial properties and 1,169 outbuildings were also destroyed. And, most tragically, 22 people lost their lives in the fires. The total cost of the recent fires is still unknown, but it will surely be in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Beyond the human toll, the Southern California fires represent a major environmental catastrophe, the scale of which we cannot yet fully determine. These devastating fires destroyed not only trees but also watersheds and habitat for numerous species of floral and fauna. Winter rains will bring further damage, as barren landscapes will lead to widespread erosion, polluting California's streams, rivers, and lakes, and clogging water treatment facilities.

I want to take this opportunity to commend the thousands of individuals who helped fight the fires. As I mentioned earlier, over 15,000 people contributed to the army of firefighters, medics, and logistical supporters and volunteers who helped to eventually extinguish the fires. In the midst of the widespread destruction, it is easy to forget the achievements of Federal, State and local agencies.

As you are aware, former Governor Gray Davis, in consultation with then Governor-elect Arnold Schwarzenegger, named a Blue Ribbon Commission to review the effort to fight the State's recent wildfires and provide recommendations to prevent destruction from future fires. The Commission will present its recommendations in March 2004. Andrea Tuttle, the State Forester at the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, will represent the Resources Agency on the Commission. I urge you to include a copy of the Commission's report and recommendations as part of this hearing record.

## **State & Local Preparedness**

The State of California, with its Federal and local partners, has made great strides in preparing for large-scale wildfires and mobilizing resources to react once a fire begins.

San Bernardino and Riverside Counties manage fire emergencies through an incident command-based, multi-agency organization known as a Mountain Area Safety Task Force (MAST). San Diego County created a similar organization called the Forest Area Safety Task Force (FAST). These groups include the county emergency and public works organizations, local Fire Safe Councils, the U.S. Forest Service, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF), the Office of Emergency Services, California Highway Patrol, California Department of Transportation, California Department of Fish and Game, and local utility operators. These organizations developed and operate from strategic plans that serve to guide planning, preparedness, evacuation response, and mitigation activities.

I cannot stress enough the importance and the strength of the interagency cooperation we have experienced with our partners in formulating these preparedness plans. Cooperation between Regional Forester Jack Blackwell and myself, between Forest Supervisor Gene Zimmerman and CDF Unit Chiefs

Tom O'Keefe of San Bernardino county and Tom Tisdale of Riverside, and between our staffs has been tremendous. At every step along the way, the Federal, State, county and special districts worked together in ways they have never experienced before.

The following is a short summary of the actions taken by the State of California in preparation for the recent fires:

- CDF took a strong role clearing evacuation routes, temporary community shelter sites and fuel breaks utilizing inmate crews. We have reduced the paperwork for cutting trees on private lands, and coordinated implementation of the Endangered Species Act with the California Department of Fish and Game, especially with respect to protecting the Southern Rubber Boa snake.
- The California Department of Transportation provided trucks for hauling tree waste to disposal sites, and stockpiled signs, cones and heavy equipment for clearing roads in the event of evacuation.
- The California Integrated Waste Management Board permitted expanded use of the transfer sites for the tremendous volumes of wood waste, and the local Air Pollution Control District streamlined air quality permits for the air curtain burners. Those burners can efficiently dispose of large quantities of forest waste at very high temperatures with very little air emission.
- The California Highway Patrol worked closely with local sheriffs and law enforcement in designing and coordinating evacuation plans to help responders get in while getting evacuees out.
- The Contractors State License Board, in coordination with CDF, is conducting field inspections to insure that the public is protected from fraudulent business practice.
- We have participated with all the MAST agencies in San Bernardino County in a tabletop exercise to prepare for a wildfire in the Lake Arrowhead area.
- Every strike team, every firefighter coming into southern California is given a copy of this special Red Book, a Structure Protection Pre-Plan and mandatory briefing to inform them of the extraordinary fire behavior they may encounter, which may exceed anything they have every experienced before.

Strong interagency coordination served California well during the recent fires. I pledge to continue these efforts under the Schwarzenegger Administration.

### **Forest Management is Fire Prevention**

However, while coordinated planning and effective reaction to wildfires is important, this alone does not address the root cause of the problem. California's forests are in a state of crisis. Policies of 100 percent fire suppression and no reasonable thinning have left our forests choked full of dead and dying trees. In some areas around Lake Arrowhead, tree densities of 400 trees per acre are common. Scientists estimate that, historically, a healthy forest in this region would support only 40-50 trees per acre. With a density ten times historic levels, trees must compete for sunlight and water. As a result, more and more trees are stressed out and unable to ward off disease or fire.

More importantly, the massive increase in forest density creates a virtual tinderbox of forest fuels. At one time, naturally occurring fires burned out small trees and brush, leaving larger trees unscathed. Today, the vegetation build-up causes fires to burn hotter and higher, destroying entire forests in their path.

Recent drought has undoubtedly contributed to this problem. When trees lack adequate water, they are unable to produce the sap that is needed to ward off deadly insects like the bark beetle. As any visitor to Lake Arrowhead can tell you, bark beetle infestation has greatly contributed to the demise of our forests and enhanced the tinderbox effect.

Again, I want to commend the Chairman for the passage of the Healthy Forests Act. This legislation recognizes that forest management practices need to adapt recent scientific understandings on the causes of wildfires. The U.S. General Accounting Office summarized the problem succinctly in a recent report:

Human Activities – especially the federal government's decades-old policy of suppressing all wildland fires - have resulted in dangerous accumulations of brush, small trees, and other vegetation on federal lands. This vegetation has increasingly provided fuel for large, intense wildland fires, particularly in the dry, interior western United States.

Under the previous Administration, the State of California recognized that our forests were in dire need of responsible and active management. The State spent significant resources removing dead and dying trees from our forests. Furthermore, following a proclamation from Governor Davis, the California Public Utility

Commission has ordered Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric to remove all dead or dying trees that potentially threatening transmission and distribution lines in their service territory. Edison predicts that tree removal cost will run as high as \$400 million and could take several years. These efforts, and more, will be necessary to protect our forests and reduce the potential for catastrophic wildfires.

But, I want to caution the public. This problem was not created overnight. And, it will not be solved overnight. It will be an expensive endeavor, which is especially challenging for a State in the midst of fiscal woes. Given the sensitivities in California regarding forest management policies, I am convinced that a strong stakeholder process is essential. The State of California and the U.S. Forest Service are not going to be successful in reducing fuels without the help of local governments, residents, landowners, and interest groups. I pledge that the Resources Agency will recognize and respect differences in geography, habit, and human population that occur in our forests. We will engage stakeholders and look for local solutions to managing these forests and reducing the risk of catastrophic fire.

To meet this challenge, the State of California must seek innovative solutions to forest thinning that both respects our environmental values and protects our forest from future fire calamities. One such idea is to promote the development of biomass power plants in or adjacent to our forests. Currently, most of the dead or diseased trees that are removed from our forests have little or no commercial value. They are often hauled off to municipal dumps or incinerated. In San Bernardino County alone, 400-500 tons of wood waste must be disposed of daily.

As we speak, Southern California Edison, with the help of the California Energy Commission, is pursuing the development of multiple biomass plants in areas affected by bark beetle infestation. By converting wood waste into energy, California can protect its forests and provide cleaner renewable energy to its citizens. As Secretary, I will seek to promote biomass power sources and other forest management techniques that achieve both economic and environmental benefits.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for holding this important hearing. As public servants, we know that government is designed to provide basic services and protect its citizens. In the area of forest management, we are failing on both accounts. The forest management policies of the past led to environmental destruction and the loss of human life and property. If policymakers do not rise to this challenge, our forests will continue to burn in massive fires like the ones that ravaged Southern California this fall. It is time to start actively managing our forests in a way that protects these beautiful natural resources and reduces the risk of catastrophic fires that threaten so many communities in California.