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**Testimony**

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**Committee on Natural Resources**

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## **Introduction**

Thank you, Chairman Tiffany and Ranking Member Neguse and members of the Subcommittee, for the opportunity to testify regarding challenges facing forest management, wildfire suppression, and wildland firefighters ahead of the 2023 wildfire season.

I serve as President/CEO for the California Forestry Association (Calforests).

## **Calforests Background**

Calforests membership includes private industrial forest owners and managers, and forest products companies ranging from sawmills, veneer mills, and several biomass powerplants. Our members are committed to the sustainable management of our private forest resources and supporting active forest management of National Forests within California. Cumulatively our members own and manage more than 3.5 million acres of timberland in California and share thousands of miles of ownerships boundaries with United States Forest Service (USFS) and other federal lands.

## **California Winter and the coming 2023 Fire Season**

Just like the many recent wildfire seasons, the winter of 2022 – 2023 in California has also made national headlines. Despite record precipitation and the largest snowpack in recent memory, the forest conditions that have led to severe wildfire seasons, particularly on our National Forests, still exist. The question, as we look to the looming fire season for 2023, is how long it will take for overstocked fuel conditions and brush laden fire scars to dry out and become susceptible to large fires once again. Certainly, the fine fuels at low to mid elevation of the Sierra are beginning to cure, and these fuels will likely become the forefront of the 2023 fire season.

Additionally, with such extraordinary snow loads, there is significant concern over issues of access. As temperatures rise the snow melt will likely reveal issue of blocked roads due to fallen trees and roads surfaces that need significant maintenance to reestablish access that is critical to engaging in rapid and effective firefighting when ignitions occur. It is unlikely that the USFS will have the manpower or contracting efficiency necessary to reestablish the necessary access prior to the peak of fire season.

This issue of access for firefighting, along with unknowns as it relates to extended periods of extreme heat or lightening, make it important that fire protection forces be fully staffed as soon as possible and that all suppression tools, including the use of aerial deployed fire retardant, be made available throughout the 2023 fire season. It is critically important for US Forest Service to fight fires aggressively during wildfire season – immediate response to suppress, fighting fire 24-7, tailor the use of backfires, and work closely with their state firefighting agency partners like CAL FIRE.

In spite of the heavy snow and rain this winter, wildfire will continue to impact water resources, air quality, recreation, forest carbon and – for Calforests’ members – the timberlands they own and manage to generate renewable forests products that society depends on.

### **Wildfire Prevention Activities**

On August 12, 2020, the USFS, Pacific Southwest Region, and the State of California entered into an “Agreement for Shared Stewardship of California’s Forest and Rangelands.”<sup>1</sup>

The agreement commits to restoring healthy forests and rangelands in California through actions including vegetation treatments on one

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<sup>1</sup> (<https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/8.12.20-CA-Shared-Stewardship-MOU.pdf> Accessed October 15, 2021)

million acres per year by 2025 (500,000 acres USFS and 500,000 acres state and private lands). Calforests strongly supports this cooperative effort. The joint targets for treatments are likely the minimum necessary to meaningfully reduce the devastating impacts from wildfires across California.

In March of this year, the first reports of tracking were provided, with the following metric provided:

<b>DRAFT</b> Activity Acres	<b>FY21</b>	<b>FY22</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>700,000</b>	<b>700,000</b>
Reporting Entity		
CAL FIRE	140,000	150,000
Other State	120,000*	175,000
US Forest Service	145,000	130,000
Other Federal	95,000	40,000
Private Timber	200,000*	200,000

\*Assumes FY21 activity data is similar to FY22 for Caltrans (other state) and Private Timber



As you can see, USFS Region 5, which is responsible for management of the greatest proportion of forestlands in California (15.3 million acres), successfully treated an average of just over 137,000 acres in the last two fiscal years. While this is a laudable effort, it appears unlikely that the goals of the “Million Acre Strategy” will be met by the established timelines. Meeting this goal of prevention is a key metric in addressing the wildfire crisis that we face in California.

The pace and scale of the treatments accomplished must increase dramatically to not only meet desired targets, but also actively protect

critical habitat, water resources, timber resources, adjacent communities, and private timberlands.

In contrast to the slow pace of fuels treatment, the acres impacted by wildfire in California continue to climb drastically, setting new records for burned acres on an annual basis. Over 10 million acres (Refer to Appendix 1) of the USFS Region 5 National Forests have experienced wildfire over the past 20 years.

### **Post Fire Recovery and Reforestation**

From 2019 - 2021, more than 4.9 million acres of forested land burned in wildfires across the state. While the greatest proportion of those acres will likely require some level of recovery-based management, at least 1.5 million acres are identified as at risk of conversion from forest to non-forest vegetation types. This forest loss results from extraordinarily high intensity wildfire over large footprints and the reburning of previously burned areas that were not subsequently restored or reforested.

During the same three-year period, a conservative estimate of 50,000 acres were reforested each year in California by Calforests members, whereas USFS Region 5 reforested approximately 8,000 acres annually, which represents less than 1% of the public lands that require post fire recovery and reforestation. There is a short window of opportunity (about 1-3 years) after high-severity fire to reestablish forests when costs are lowest and probability of success is highest. Delays in taking timely action will result in higher costs for reforestation with a lower probability of success, and will result in a significant reduction in carbon sequestration, at least in the near term.

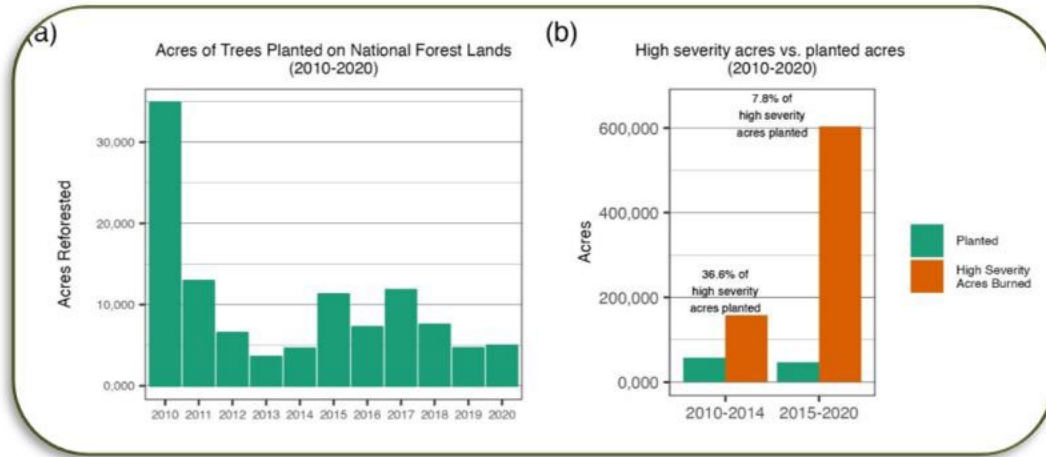


Figure 1: (a) Number of acres planted during the period 2010-2020 on National Forest System lands. Source: USDA Forest Service FACTS database. (b) Acres reforested and replanted compared to acres burned at high severity across two five-year periods on USFS Region 5

Things must change and I am prepared to discuss some of the necessary steps that must be taken.

### Focus Points for this Testimony

- 1) Maintain and build upon aggressive initial attack to keep fires small; and
- 2) Support increased USFS use of the tools and authorities provided by the Congress;
- 3) Develop a Cooperative Partnerships with Private Entities to Drive Suppression, Prevention, and Recovery Efforts.

### Maintain and Build Upon Aggressive Initial Attack

Conditions across the forested landscape of California are simply dangerous during wildfire season. In recent research published by the

USFS, Dr. Malcolm North, indicates that tree density on our Federal Forests is 6 to 7 times greater than they were a century ago. Dr. North also indicates that tree size has diminished, and these forested conditions are not as resilient to the wildfires we are consistently experiencing today.

There is also a large population of people which have moved into the Wildland Urban Interface over the last many decades, along with other resources at risk across all forested lands in California and beyond. The only tried and true way to manage fires burning in these conditions during the peak fire season is to extinguish them immediately. Allowing fires to burn “for resource benefit” is a luxury that California (and much of the rest of the West) cannot currently afford. With fuel loads this high and the potential to return to drought always present, any fire can go from “beneficial” to dangerous in a matter of hours- or even minutes.

During peak wildfire season, burning for resource benefit takes resources that just simply cannot be spared in time of need. Rapidly changing weather patterns, unpredictability of human caused ignitions, outrageous fuel loads, and firefighter and civilian safety simply introduce too many variables into the equation to allow fire to burn during the height of fire season as a means of vegetation management.

To be clear, Calforests supports all tools in the wildfire prevention toolbox, including prescribed fire at the right times and places. We simply are no longer in a situation where we can allow uncontrolled burns as a substitute for active fire management.

### **Reliance upon Existing Tools and Authorities –**

The wildfire crisis in an emergency in California, and across much of the west. As such, Calforests respectfully urges all forest management actions, including fire prevention, be treated as an emergency. The Infrastructure Act created a new Emergency Action authority for the

USFS. To date, the USFS has approved the use of this Emergency Action authority for one project in California. In times of crisis, this authorization should be relied upon much more heavily.

The USFS has the authority to execute projects under Alternative Arrangements (36 CFR 220.4), which the agency has used twice in California- one for road clearance following the Caldor Fire and one for protection of sequoia groves in the central Sierra Nevada. This authority does not bypass the need to conduct environmental review, but rather allows for simultaneous NEPA analysis while the project is being executed to achieve resilient forest conditions in times of emergency. The dire need for increased treatments necessitates greater reliance upon all these emergency authorities.

Additionally, the Infrastructure Act created a new Categorical Exclusion for fuel break construction on USFS lands. Again, the option is narrowly relied upon in California, and the USFS has only approved 9 fuel breaks in California using the Categorical Exclusion provided in the Infrastructure Act. With an elevated use of the Categorical Exclusion and Emergency Authority, projects on federal land could be better coordinated private lands as well to design a system of treated landscapes that would maximize the benefits of these management actions.

While the USFS Region 5 has more aggressively used emergency authorities and Categorical Exclusions than some other regions, we certainly believe there are far more opportunities to rely upon these expedited environmental reviews. With a truncated field season due to winter conditions, it's imperative that the agency use every tool to expedite required analysis wherever possible.

It is critical to remember that none of these authorities open new lands to forest management activities. All projects conducted using Alternative Arrangements, Emergency Actions, or any Categorical Exclusion must confirm to existing forest plan standards and guides,



and the agency takes steps to ensure that these authorities are not used where they could potentially impact sensitive resources. None of them can be used in designated Wilderness areas and their use in inventoried roadless areas is extremely limited.

With wider use of CE and Emergency Actions Authority, projects on federal land could be better coordinated with private lands as well to design a system of treated landscapes that would maximize the benefits of these management actions.

### **Develop a Cooperative Partnerships with Private Entities to Drive Suppression, Prevention and Recovery Efforts**

In California, private landowners and forest management timber operators provide forest management capacity to achieve the forest health, community protection, and forest management goals discussed here today. In the case of fire suppression, it is not uncommon to have fire suppression assets and personnel overwhelmed. As an example, in 2020, a weather pattern resulted in over 11,000 lightning strikes across California in a single day, setting the stage for a disastrous summer of well over 1 million acres burned, thousands of structures lost, and multiple civilian and firefighter deaths and injuries. Conditions were ripe for wildfire, weather conditions were extreme, but resource drawdown was also rampant. The ability for the fire protection system to respond to multiple fires burning simultaneously was overwhelmed. In trying times like this, private resources could be expeditiously deployed to assist in meeting suppression shortfalls.

The same holds true in both fire prevention and post fire recovery. The private sector maintains the technical expertise and networks to engage in management activities focused on both prevention and post fire recovery and is eager to assist federal partners in achieving goals of prevention and post fire recovery and reforestation.

This is of particular concern given that the USFS shares thousands of miles of property lines with other landowners, and in excess of 6,000 miles of shared ownership boundaries with Calforests members. In addition, many communities are adjacent to federally managed lands. This issue of adjacency is critical in our era of wildfire crisis, and expansion, connection, completion and maintenance of fuel breaks and post fire recovery efforts conducted on private lands near communities, utilities and water infrastructure and roads onto federally managed land represents the steps necessary to achieve established fire protection goals and expectations. The federal partners cannot do this alone, and it is clear that assistance is required. Again, the private sector is available to partner, but better pathways to allow these partnerships to be developed and drive meaningful outcomes must be developed.

Lastly, the forest products sector is a recognized partner in the wildfire crisis. While expertise in forest management within the sector is critical, facility infrastructure is as important. Without market driven support, the work that desperately needs to be conducted on all lands will suffer. The required level of public investment will continue to be extraordinary without outlets that utilize the material being generated from forest health and postfire recovery projects.

Infrastructure retention and development, in terms of traditional sawmills, co-generation facilities, low value wood fiber utilization are all goals in California, but the challenges are real and present. Of these challenges, one of the prevalent mitigating circumstances is supply agreements. Federal partners, who again managed the greatest proportion of all forestlands in California, are able to engage in the development of obligatory supply agreements for green material. This would incentivize investment in costly facilities that would provide additional and meaningful capacity to assist all partners --federal, state, private, non-industrial, tribal and NGO partners -- in meeting our shared goals.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on this critical issue.

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## Appendix 1:

**Figure 1:** Acres Burned on USFS Region 5 lands within California

