



**Testimony**

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**Submitted To  
Chairman Tom Tiffany  
Subcommittee on Federal Lands  
Committee on Natural Resources  
U.S. House of Representatives**

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## **Introduction**

Thank you, Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse and members of the House Subcommittee on Federal Lands for the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 188 that would reduce wildfires' adverse economic, social and environmental impacts to our communities and water resources. I request that this formal statement be entered into the hearing record, and I will summarize my testimony for the subcommittee.

I am Robert Dugan and appear before the subcommittee as Chairman of the Placer County Water Agency (PCWA) Board of Directors. PCWA has led the effort to develop sustainable approaches to address wildfire impacts. Of direct importance, PCWA's General Manager, Andy Fecko, is currently a member of the federal Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission working to develop recommendations on how this nation can better address wildfires. This hearing is especially timely given the Commission's ongoing work that collectively will steer the country in a direction that enhances our mutually shared goal of protecting communities and reducing the costly impacts of wildfires. PCWA is also an active member of the Association of California Water Agencies, National Water Resources Association and National Hydropower Association; groups that are working diligently in support of effective federal, state and local policies and programs to advance wildfire suppression efforts.

## **About PCWA**

PCWA constructed the Middle Fork Project in the 1960s to ensure a reliable local water supply. PCWA's management of the project is grounded in a belief that headwaters management is essential to the watershed's health. PCWA operations are located in the Middle Fork American

River watershed and our headquarters are three hours east of Sacramento, California. PCWA owns and operates the Middle Fork American River Project that provides water supply, generates hydroelectric power, and supports recreational opportunities for the 250,000 citizens of western Placer County. Integral to these activities is PCWA's commitment to support the ecosystem of our watershed. I would further add that our environmental stewardship and commitment to sustainable uses of our natural resources has allowed us to work with inter-regional stakeholders to deliver supplemental water supplies during the past several years of extraordinary drought conditions in California.

### **Our Experiences - Major Wildfires**

Since 2014, the American River watershed has suffered three major wildfires: 1) King, 2) Caldor, and 3) Mosquito. These fires devastated nearly 400,000 acres, predominantly on federal forest lands. However, the impacts of these fires were not limited to federal lands. The spillover effects directly compromised our agency's ability to carry out its core missions.

These high intensity wildfires compromised water quality. This occurred during active burning and for months and years after the fires ended. The impacts from the wildfires include blackened watersheds, increased flooding and erosion due to the denuded environment, water quality impairments to water-supply reservoirs, limitation of hydropower generation facilities' operation, and impairments to fisheries and other natural resources.

The effects of these large catastrophic wildfires linger for decades. The impact on forestry health can last for centuries as nature seeks to come back from the devastation. From a public services perspective, water and hydroelectric utilities that operate in these watersheds must

grapple in the aftermath of wildfires with circumstances that are often worse than the active wildfire event. For example, when wildfire debris enters lakes and reservoirs, the volumes can be so significant that they overtake the body of water, rapidly decreasing valuable water storage capacity. Operationally, the debris blocks spillways, damages water conveyance equipment and hydro-electric generation equipment. This imposes substantial costs on our ratepayers and increases threats to water supply reliability.

Allow me to highlight wildfires consequences that we have experienced and how PCWA proactively worked to mitigate the impacts:

### **King Fire**

- In 2014, the King Fire burned 97,717-acres, fueled by extremely low humidity and high winds that drove the fire into the remote and densely forested Rubicon River canyon, an important tributary to the American River. Once it reached the Rubicon canyon, the fire exploded overnight, devastating the watershed with high-severity incineration. Complete loss of vegetative cover has exposed soils to erosion on thousands of acres of steep, sloping river canyons.
- The U.S. Forest Service estimates that over 300,000 tons of topsoil have eroded into Rubicon River the first year after the King Fire. In the resulting years, PCWA spent nearly \$3 million to remove sediment and debris transported and deposited into Oxbow Reservoir. The sediment removed was only that necessary to recover operations of our equipment, most of the sediment remains to date. Sediment removal requires PCWA's Ralston Powerhouse to be taken offline, therefore producing no hydropower.

- Following the King Fire, PCWA led a nationally recognized collaborative watershed restoration effort, the French Meadows Forest Restoration Project, to restore forest health and resilience and reduce the risk of high-severity wildfire in this critical watershed. PCWA collaborates with the Forest Service, The Nature Conservancy, Placer County and local conservation NGOs to facilitate this successful project.

### **Mosquito Fire**

- This fire burned 76,788 acres in Placer and El Dorado, California counties. It was California's largest wildfire in 2022. The fire occurred in the heart of the American River watershed and threatened to destroy the communities of Foresthill and Georgetown and potentially spread into the Lake Tahoe Basin.
- PCWA owns and operates the Middle Fork American River Project, which supplies water to western Placer County and provides clean energy to the California grid. The Mosquito Fire destroyed powerlines that deliver this energy to the grid, making this source of energy unavailable during the winter cyclone of December 2022 and January 2023. This downtime resulted in tens of millions of dollars in lost revenue, but more importantly, starved the nation of clean energy during this extreme weather event and forcing greater use of petroleum energy sources.
- PCWA estimates that 1.3 million tons of topsoil may erode into our Oxbow Reservoir because of the Mosquito Fire. This volume of topsoil is more than 10 percent of Oxbow Reservoir and will have crippling effects on hydropower operations. The work to recover from the Mosquito Fire's impacts will be significant, long-term and costly.

- Two major federal roads providing access to the Tahoe and Eldorado National Forests suffered major damage from the Mosquito Fire, eliminating public access and severely restricting PCWA's access to its hydropower system. If these roads become impassable, PCWA will not have winter access to its reservoirs and powerplants. These roads are critical to public health and safety for firefighting and other emergency response.

These examples vividly document the dramatic impact of wildfires and the priority that must be addressed to mitigate future wildfire events. Today's review of proposed solutions is an important first step and PCWA hopes that Congress will move expeditiously to pass legislation to provide us, and water agencies across the west, with the tools to meet the new normal of wildfires.

### **Support for H.R. 188, the Proven Forest Management Act**

PCWA supports H.R. 188, which would expand, across all National Forest System lands, a wildfire mitigation tool that was successful in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Specifically, it provides that hazardous fuel reduction project up to 10,000 acres, developed collaboratively with local governments and consistent with the forest plan, may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment under the National Environmental Policy Act.

This administrative flexibility would deliver the U.S. Forest Service immediate benefits for two specific forest health management activities:

1. Pre-Wildfire Mitigation - National Forest System lands that have been identified as in need of treatment to reduce the threat of insect and disease infestations and catastrophic wildfires to protect communities and the environment is imperative; and,
2. Post-Wildfire Forest Restoration - The protection of the natural and man-made infrastructure of our watersheds post fire must be addressed. Excluding the requirement for an Environmental Assessment or an Environmental Impact Statement would streamline post-fire management activities to improve the long-term health of the landscape.

The 2021 Caldor Fire, which burned 221,835 acres, provides a case study on this type of use of categorical exclusion, as provide for in Public Law 114-322 for the Lake Tahoe Basin, helped mitigate the impacts of the wildfire and protected the Tahoe Basin communities.

- When the Caldor Fire entered the Lake Tahoe Basin, it entered Christmas Valley, an area where the U.S. Forest Service, the State of California and local governments had completed several forest thinning projects. In addition, the South Tahoe Public Utility District, in collaboration with the U.S. Forest Service, expediated the installation of water infrastructure (upsized water lines, hydrants, water tanks). Local fire agencies also led a concerted fire-adapted communities effort to fire-hardened homes and businesses.
- The combination of investing in water infrastructure for fire suppression, community wildfire preparedness and hazardous fuels treatments reduced the Caldor Fire intensity and enhanced suppression efforts to protect the Lake Tahoe Basin.

- After the fire, the Forest Service has used the categorical exclusion to expediate a Tahoe Basin Caldor Hazard Tree Fuels Reduction Project to exclude the need for either an Environmental Assessment or an Environmental Impact Statement to carry out the project.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate PCWA's support for H.R. 188 and present brief recommendations to address identified gaps specific to pre- and post-wildfire mitigation and response policies.

The reauthorization of the Farm Bill and the anticipated recommendations by the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission present additional responses to enhance forest management and post-fire mitigation. We believe that it is important to report legislation through this committee and to secure House passage before the next wildfire season inflicts new public health, economic dislocation and natural resources losses. In addition, the U.S. Forest Service's 10-year strategy to implement strategic restoration projects on 50 million acres of federal, state, and private land provides an ambitious goal to protect our communities and critical watersheds. This is an important step.

There needs to be a clear policy for short and long-term mitigation for post-fire debris flow impacts to receiving waterways and to public water and hydroelectric facilities on federal lands. These impacts have historically been under-invested in and are costly. Mitigation measures include stabilizing topsoil before ensuing winter storms, sediment traps in the waterways, and sediment removal once in the waterways.



It is vital that interagency coordination among the U.S. Forest Service, Department of the Interior and Federal Highways Administration must be improved to provide for an expediated repair or replacement of federal roads damaged by wildfire. This would include the ability for federal agencies to contract with local governments to facilitate repairs utilizing existing contractual relationships with local-regional construction companies.

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.