

Committee on Resources

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TESTIMONY BEFORE

THE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection

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Chairman Pombo and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of Governor Davis and Secretary for Resources Mary Nichols I appreciate this opportunity to provide information regarding the role of the state of California in this extraordinary tree mortality situation in the three southern California counties of San Bernardino, Riverside and San Diego.

History of the Problem

As you have heard from other speakers, the nearly 400,000 acres of standing dead conifer, oaks and chaparral are the result of a combination of three primary factors: First, we have experienced four years of an unprecedented drought. The 01/02 winter was the driest year in recorded history. Last winter's precipitation was near normal but with significantly less snow fall than normal and while not a drought it did contribute to the drought effects. This has significantly weakened the trees. Second, many of these forest and chaparral stands are in an unnatural, overstocked condition due to a history of aggressive fire suppression coupled with a lack of forest management, i.e. lack of harvesting to reduce competition. Third, natural background levels of beetle infestation have suddenly reached epidemic proportions, taking advantage of the weakened condition of the trees and their inability to produce sap. Trees use their sap to "pitch out" insect eggs. Drought stressed trees don't have enough moisture to create the sap, therefore the larvae hatch and devour the tree from the inside. This outbreak is just one example of millions of acres of national forests now affected by beetle kill throughout the western states and Alaska. What makes this example especially compelling is the presence of the mountain communities of homeowners and recreational, tourist-based economies completely lying within U.S. Forest Service Direct Protection Area.

The extraordinary nature of this die-off became especially clear last fall when vast areas of the conifer forest became a visual sea of orange. I have been on several reconnaissance tours of the area over the past several years: in 1999 I observed the Willows fire which consumed over 63,000 acres immediately adjacent to Lake Arrowhead to the north; early this summer USFS Regional Forester Jack Blackwell and I conducted a preparedness review on the status of evacuation planning; and more recently in April I accompanied Governor Davis on an inspection tour. With each trip we have witnessed ever expanding mortality.

California's Response

Recognizing the severe threat of catastrophic fire posed by the dead fuels, Governor Davis proclaimed a State of Emergency in March, 2003 directing state agencies to clear evacuation routes and community shelter areas, and to streamline state permit and contract procedures. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) initiated numerous tasks in cooperation with the Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES), the United States Forest Service (USFS), local government agencies and Fire Safe Councils. Priorities for immediate action were originally set in four areas:

Creating safe evacuation routes by clearing dead trees and removing vegetation,

Creating safe shelter-in-place centers
Creating safe communications centers on USFS land, and
Creating strategic community protection zones by clearing dead trees, thinning forests, and reducing flammable vegetation.

This list has subsequently grown as we work with all agencies and levels of jurisdiction to include all the key task areas of evacuation planning, tree removal and waste disposal, and suppression preparedness.

After the State of Emergency declaration in March, Governor Davis also signed Executive Order D-69-03 on June 20, 2003 to augment state fire suppression capability in the three counties. As a result, we were able to increase staffing on 53 CDF engines which added 212 firefighters, and the deployment of ten refurbished fire engines and 40 crewmembers to the three counties. One firefighting helicopter and crew was leased, staffed and assigned to San Diego County, and four additional CDF Conservation Camp fire crews were added in Southern California. Additional funding allowed the California National Guard to prepare its fixed-wing aircraft and pre-position ground support equipment for immediate response in the event of a wildfire in the area. OES has developed and implemented a quick response plan to deploy OES engine strike teams into mountain communities as necessary. In support of these actions the expenditure of approximately \$8.3 million was authorized.

Local Government Actions

All affected local governments have undertaken many specific activities. As you will hear in more detail, Riverside, San Bernardino, and San Diego Counties have activated their emergency operations centers and have worked cooperatively through their respective offices of emergency management. San Bernardino and Riverside Counties manage the emergency through an incident command-based, multi-agency organization known as a Mountain Area Safety Taskforce (MAST). San Diego County created a similar organization called the Forest Area Safety Taskforce (FAST). These groups include the county emergency and public works organizations, local Fire Safe Councils, the USFS, CDF, OES, California Highway Patrol, California Department of Transportation (CalTrans), 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.

Interagency Cooperation

I cannot stress enough the importance and the strength of the inter-agency 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 Chief Tom Tisdale of Riverside, and between our staffs has been tremendous. At every step along the way, the federal, state, county and special districts have worked together in ways they have never experienced before.

From the state of California many agencies have participated.

CDF has taken 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 has 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 has permitted expanded use of the transfer sites for the tremendous volumes of wood waste, and the local Air Pollution Control District has 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 has worked closely with local sheriffs and law enforcement in designing and coordinating evacuation plans to help get responders 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.

Biomass Options

As we move into longer term consideration of how to dispose of the tremendous volumes of dead wood and slash, the California Energy Commission, the Governor's Office of Planning and Research, and the California Power and Conservation Financing Authority are working with Southern California Edison to evaluate the feasibility of locating a biomass power plant. Inventories of available biomass are underway with the assistance of ESRI, a GIS and Mapping Software vendor which has voluntarily provided GIS mapping services and satellite imagery. CDF is working with CalTrans and Southern California Edison to survey tree mortality along the highways, evacuation routes and utility lines, and the USFS is working with CDF to co-fund a team of CDF foresters to assist.

Recent Fire Activity

All of our pre-fire preparedness was suddenly put to the test earlier this month with the ignition of the Bridge Fire below the communities of Running Springs and Smiley Park. In a short time period the fire extended to 1400 acres moving up through chaparral that had not burned for 50 years. Fortunately aggressive initial attack and an increase in humidity slowed the fire shortly before it reached the dead conifer zone. Reports indicate that the multi-agency response was excellent, voluntary and mandatory evacuations were conducted efficiently, and residents were prepared and cooperative. However, had conditions been windier and drier, this outcome could have been far different. This served as a sudden, startling wake-up call. It was a clear indicator of the flammability of the fuels and the speed with which a catastrophic fire could suddenly occur.

Conclusion

We thank Congressman Lewis, Senator Feinstein and Secretary Veneman for their efforts in working to bring additional funding to this serious situation. Each entity brought resources to the table, but more is needed. The state continues to work closely with FEMA to determine what additional assistance may be available.

As you can see, significant progress has been made but the continuing threat is enormous and there is still much remaining to be accomplished. Nature is taking its course and has presented us with an ecological change on a scale that we have not experienced before. Academic researchers are anxious to document and study this extreme change.

All the agencies are to be commended for coming as far as they have with as complicated a problem as they were faced with. We have made progress. The players are engaged. We have a good start on setting up the mechanisms for receiving funds and putting them onto the ground. Our first responders will do the very best they can if and when a wildfire occurs. The job of educating residents and visiting tourists on fire safety, evacuation planning, and tree clearance will be a continual one. With the entry of Southern California Edison and the large scale utility line clearance program we can start to think more comprehensively of long term biomass disposal options.

It has not been a simple thing for the multiple agencies to face this. Everyone has had to work very hard, and I extend my sincere appreciation to them. Our firefighting season in Southern California is far from over, and this condition will extend for many years before the acute threat has passed.

Again, I would like to thank you for the federal financial assistance we have received and for the outstanding support provided by USFS and FEMA in dealing with this threat.