

Wildfires

Adequate Fire Suppression Includes Ability to Clear Forestlands

Background

Periodic wildfires are a part of the natural cycle of forests. The fires 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 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 and climate change. The fire season has lengthened almost into a year-round phenomenon.

Over time, more and more homes and commercial enterprises have been built on the urban fringe interfacing with forestlands and scrublands. Small rural communities exist within forested areas of the state supported by tourism, recreation or the timber industry. The rapid growth in vineyards and wineries in Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino counties spurred corresponding growth in commercial and residential developments, again on the urban fringe bordering forested lands, which already had many vacation and retirement homes. These structures on the fringe are vulnerable to wildfires and the cost of fighting wildfires in these areas is increasing rapidly.

Newer structures built under current building codes requiring use of noncombustible materials are proving to be very fire resistant. However, there are many older structures still in use. Structures unencumbered with loans do not have to carry fire insurance. Also, not everyone observes keeping defensible space around their structures clear of debris to aid firefighting.

Impact on Business

Uncontrolled wildfires are costly for business. Business structures, residences of employees and business owners are all at risk. Wildfires can disrupt normal commerce through extended periods of time due to road closures, water damage, poor air quality, erosion-causing landslides and lack of basic amenities.

When their trees burn, forest landowners suffer loss of long-term investments. 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.

The wildfires that raged through the wine-producing counties caused at least \$3 billion of insured losses, according to the state insurance commissioner. The commissioner's office estimates that 14,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, 728 commercial properties, more than 3,200 personal autos, 91 commercial vehicles, 153 pieces of farm or agricultural equipment, and 111 water crafts.

RMS, a firm that predicts the economic impact of disasters, has estimated that property damage and interruption to business will cost the region between \$3 billion and \$6 billion, while AccuWeather estimates "total costs from this disaster on the economy would exceed \$85 billion."

Anticipated Action

The losses suffered from wildfires will undoubtedly cause a flurry of legislation in 2018. It is reasonable to expect legislation changing forestry regulations to allow more salvage operations to clear the burn areas. There probably will be attempts to change timber harvest plans to promote healthier forests through thinning operations, clearing undergrowth, and removing diseased trees to help stop rapid spreading of the fires. Legislation will likely be introduced to increase the amount of defensible space around a structure.

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.

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January 2018

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