



October 22, 2015

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
Member, U.S. Senate
331 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Barbara Boxer
Member, U.S. Senate
112 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Feinstein and Boxer:

On behalf of the California State Association of Counties (CSAC) and the Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC), we are writing to encourage you to work with your colleagues on the Senate Agriculture Committee to craft bipartisan legislation that would reform federal forest management policy and address the wildfire funding crisis. We believe that the current vegetation management structure is broken and that changes are needed to return our forests to health, through which a proper balance between fire prevention, habitat protection, and rural economic development can be reached.

In California, the recent Valley and Butte Fires are devastating examples of how insufficient forest management and fire prevention activities can contribute to wildfires beyond suppression. With the ongoing drought disaster, it's not difficult to see why California's 2015 wildfire season has already burned over 825,000 acres of land. In fact, the Valley and Butte Fires alone burned well over 146,000 acres and destroyed more than 1,700 homes, as well as hundreds of other structures.

CSAC and RCRC believe that strategic policy changes - like many of those proposed in the House-passed *Resilient Federal Forests Act* (HR 2647) - can lead to effective, on-the-ground shifts in the way that federal public lands are managed in California and throughout the West. For example, the House bill includes a number of provisions that would streamline the regulatory review process for certain projects - such as, salvage operations after a wildfire disaster or in situations of critical insect or disease infestation. These types of reforms make practical sense, are based on sound science, and are good policy expansions that should be included in any legislative package.

At the same time, we recognize that some provisions of H.R. 2647 may not quite strike the right balance. Therefore, we encourage you to work in a bipartisan manner to ensure that the

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environmental review process can be completed in a timely and cost-effective manner, without compromising the protection of the natural environment.

Even with a new forestry program bringing increased economic vitality to California's counties, it will take many years for the infrastructure to rise to a level of productivity that could sufficiently cover what forested counties are currently receiving under the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program. Therefore, as part of any long-term solution, CSAC and RCRC strongly urge you to support a multi-year extension of SRS.

Finally, our organizations support the idea of eliminating the need for fire budget borrowing. The current funding system leaves fire prevention and other forest management activities shortchanged. Year after year, federal firefighting agencies have exhausted their funds to fight emergency fires and are then forced to raid non-fire accounts to pay for suppression activities.

Instead, CSAC and RCRC believe that the funding structure found in legislation - the *Wildfire Disaster Funding Act* (S. 235) - would help end this dysfunctional and destructive approach. Under the bill, routine wildland firefighting costs would continue to be funded through the normal appropriations process, while the largest one percent of fire events would be treated like natural disasters and funded as such. We thank you for cosponsoring S. 235 and encourage you to support its inclusion in a comprehensive bill.

Thank you for your consideration of these important issues. If you have questions, please feel free to contact either Karen Keene at (916) 327-7500 (kkeene@counties.org) or Cyndi Hillery at (916) 447-4806 (chillery@rcrcnet.org). You can also contact our Washington, D.C. representatives. For CSAC, please contact Hasan Sarsour at (202) 898-1444 or (hs@wafed.com). For RCRC, please contact Thane Young at (202) 638-1950 (tyoung@vsadc.com).

Sincerely,



KAREN A. KEENE
Senior Legislative Representative
California State Association of Counties



CYNDI B. HILLERY
Legislative Advocate
Rural County Representatives of California

cc: California Congressional Delegation
Chairman Pat Roberts, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
Ranking Member Debbie Stabenow, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry