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The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Chairman
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
304 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
304 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Murkowski and Ranking Member Cantwell,

On behalf of the California State Association of Counties (CSAC), I am writing to commend you for your efforts to craft a bipartisan proposal aimed at improving federal forest management policy and wildfire budgeting. The types of reforms included in your discussion draft – the *Wildfire Budgeting, Response, and Forest Management Act* – make practical sense, are based on sound science, and are good policy expansions that should be given serious consideration.

As you know, the 2015 fire season was among the largest on record, as wildfires ravaged well over 10 million acres nationwide. California, in particular, was hit hard as severe drought conditions converted large swaths of forest land into mountains of tinder. In fact, the State's five largest wildfires (the Rough, River Complex, Valley, Butte, and Rocky Fires) last year burned approximately 445,000 acres of land and destroyed nearly 2,000 homes, as well as hundreds of other structures.

While El Niño storms provided some relief to the State earlier this year, several consecutive years of drought has precipitated a large outbreak of insects that have attacked and killed large areas of conifer and hardwood trees in the Central and Southern Sierra Nevada Mountains, as well as along the coastal range in both Northern and Southern California. According to estimates from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), over 29 million trees are dead as a result of the outbreak and tens of millions more are likely to die by the end of 2016. This die-off is of such scale that it worsens wildfire risk across large regions of the state and presents life-safety risks from falling trees in many of our forested communities.

As wildfires grow more intense and fire seasons grow longer, the USFS and the Department of the Interior have had to increasingly rely on transfers from fire prevention accounts and other non-fire programs to cover the cost of suppression activities. However, the proposed *Wildfire Budgeting, Response, and Forest Management Act* would end this dangerous cycle of “fire borrowing” by allowing the agencies to access disaster funding, once all appropriated suppression funding (100% of the 10-year average) has been exhausted. In addition, the bill would allow any excess suppression funds from low-fire years to be reinvested into fuel reduction projects near at-risk communities, high-value watersheds, and areas with a high wildfire hazard potential.

In addition, the draft bill would streamline the environmental review process for certain forest management activities. This would apply to projects that are either developed through a collaborative process, covered by a community wildfire protection plan, reduce hazardous fuels, install fuel and fire breaks, restore forest health, or protect municipal water supplies and wildlife

habitat. These, as well as other reforms, would be a step in the right direction and would go a long way toward improving the health of our forests. However, we do believe that more needs to be done to address the aforementioned tree-mortality crisis.

While CSAC is encouraged that the Energy and Natural Resources Committee will consider legislation aimed at improving the health and productivity of our federal forests, we also urge you to work in a bipartisan fashion to reauthorize the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program, which expired at the end of fiscal year 2015. SRS payments – which are provided to forest counties affected by the steep decline in federal timber harvests – are used to maintain local roads and schools, operate search and rescue missions, and provide many other essential local services. Until a sustainable, long-term solution is developed to address the decline in forest production, this will continue to be an important bridge program for rural counties in California.

In closing, CSAC appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the discussion draft, and our association looks forward to working with you in the coming months to advance some of these reforms. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (916) 327-7500 (kkeene@counties.org) or our Washington, D.C. representative Hasan Sarsour at (202) 898-1444 (hs@wafed.com).

Sincerely,



Matt Cate
CSAC Executive Director

cc: Senator Dianne Feinstein
Senator Barbara Boxer
Senator Ron Wyden
Senator Mike Crapo
Senator Jim Risch
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
California Congressional Delegation