

Recovery Starts Local

A Better Blueprint for Disaster
Recovery and Strengthening
Community
Resilience



California State
Association of Counties



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A Better Blueprint for Disaster Recovery and Strengthening Community Resilience

In recent years, California has experienced an increasing frequency and intensity of disasters, including wildfires, droughts, floods, and public health emergencies. Each disaster disrupts entire communities, often exceeding the response capacity of local jurisdictions. California's counties have learned difficult lessons from these crises, including the devastating 2025 Los Angeles County Wildfires, which further underscores the urgency of streamlining rebuilding efforts.

Counties play a critical role in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. Local governments are often the first to respond, triggering state and federal aid while leading long-term rebuilding efforts. With 58 counties varying in geography, demographics, and resources, emergency management and homeland security policies must be flexible and adaptable to meet the distinct needs, risks, and capacities of each county.

Strengthening Disaster Preparedness

To protect communities from future disasters – including wildfires, floods, extreme heat, and other climate-driven events – state and federal partners must invest in proactive mitigation measures. CSAC supports the following strategies to strengthen community resilience and expedite recovery efforts:

Enhance Wildfire Mitigation and Prevention

Streamline Forest Thinning Near Communities

Wildfire mitigation work has proven to be effective in slowing down wildfires such as the Bridge Fire where trees had been thinned, allowing firefighters to contain the blaze. Proven wildfire mitigation efforts, such as fuel breaks and biomass treatments, must be streamlined, particularly within a ¼-mile radius of communities. CSAC supports policies that accelerate environmental review processes for vegetation management on federal and state public lands adjacent or in proximity to high-population areas, including along public rights-of-way and evacuation routes.

Expand Funding for Home Hardening and Community Resilience

Home hardening describes vegetation management compliance and building materials used to resist the intrusion of flames or embers projected by a wildland fire. CSAC supports expanding programs like the Office of Emergency Services (CalOES) and CalFIRE Home Hardening Initiative and advocates for direct funding to counties beyond bond-dependent measures.

Require CARB Climate Scoping Plan to include Wildfire Emissions

The California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 designates the California Air Resources Board (CARB) as the state agency charged with monitoring and regulating sources of emissions of greenhouse gases. CARB is required to adopt rules and regulations to achieve the maximum technologically feasible and cost-effective greenhouse gas emissions reductions to ensure that the statewide greenhouse gas emissions are reduced to at least 40% below the statewide greenhouse gas emissions limit, as defined, no later than December 31, 2030. CSAC advocates for CARB to include wildfire emissions in its Climate Scoping Plan and supports prioritizing Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund allocations for wildfire prevention efforts.

Strengthen Local Authority and Invest in Emergency Infrastructure

Preserve Local Land-Use Authority Over Battery Storage Facilities

Energy battery system developers can bypass local permitting through AB 205 (2022), which expanded state authority to site energy facilities. Recent battery facility fires underscore the need for operator-funded fire suppression systems and rigorous safety mechanisms. Counties must retain permitting and siting authority for battery storage facilities to protect community safety. CSAC also supports the creation of a statewide programmatic Environmental Impact Report for battery storage facility siting through the California Energy Commission.

Continue to Tie Home Hardening to Insurance Rates

California regulations require insurers to take into consideration a policyholder's wildfire mitigation efforts. While counties invest in risk reduction, these efforts are not reflected in the cost and availability of insurance coverage. CSAC calls for clear state mitigation standards and greater transparency on how these measures impact the availability and affordability of insurance policies.

Support Local Fair Improvements for Community Resilience

Fairgrounds serve as critical facilities during local and statewide emergencies, including during wildfires. CSAC supports state funding to upgrade these facilities for emergency preparedness and disaster response.

Fund County Human Services for Disaster Preparedness and Response

County human services agencies play a vital role during disasters - providing mass care and shelter, ensuring access to benefits, and meeting the urgent needs of vulnerable residents. To fulfill these responsibilities, staff are often pulled from essential safety net programs. CSAC supports dedicated, ongoing state funding to establish disaster preparedness and response units within each county human services agency, ensuring they are equipped to serve communities without disrupting core services.

Support Evacuation and Shelter Planning for Vulnerable Populations

People with access and functional needs are disproportionately impacted during disasters. CSAC supports increased state resources and coordination to help counties plan and evaluate evacuation and shelter strategies that address the unique needs of these populations - before, during, and after an emergency.

Improve Water and Flood Resilience

Rethink Planning for Water Supply

Counties are often the first responders when a community runs out of water due to drought or water supply disruption. CSAC supports and sponsors SB 72 (Caballero), which would focus the state's water supply planning and would set water supply development targets across all sectors.

Secure State and Federal Support for Dam Safety

Dams provide multiple benefits to communities, from water supply and flood control to recreation. With aging infrastructure, dam safety improvements are critical for the protection of downstream communities. Counties support all efforts to improve dam safety, recognizing the many benefits all sizes of dams provide to counties

Expedite Regulatory Permitting for Flood Protection Projects

CSAC supports an expedited regulatory process for flood mitigation projects, including maintenance and operation work. Counties call for improved coordination between state and federal regulatory agencies and standardized mitigation measures for the flood management systems, levee maintenance, and capital projects that fall under certain thresholds.

Repair, Recover and Restore Stronger Communities

Counties play a critical role in disaster recovery, ensuring that communities can rebuild efficiently while maintaining public safety, housing stability, and economic resilience. However, state housing laws and regulatory requirements often create unintended obstacles that delay reconstruction efforts. Over the past eight years, significant changes to the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) and Housing Accountability Act (HAA) were designed to encourage housing development in established communities with existing infrastructure. Yet, the scale and devastation of recent disasters have exposed gaps in these policies. To streamline recovery, provide financial stability, and support long-term resilience, CSAC advocates for the following policy solutions:

Remove Barriers to Rebuilding After Disaster

Waive New State Building Standards after Disaster

Homeowners need a clear and predictable rebuilding process. New building code mandates should be deferred post-disaster, unless they address immediate health and safety risks or wildfire mitigation.

Expedite ADU Construction in the Coastal Zone

CSAC supports eliminating coastal development permit requirements for Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) to expand available housing quickly. This approach proved effective in Sonoma County following the Tubbs Fire, where ADUs helped alleviate post-disaster housing shortages.

Improve Disaster Recovery Funding and Local Authority

Move Recovery Funding to Local Governments Faster

Counties need timely and flexible funding to support disaster recovery efforts. CSAC advocates for advanced cost reimbursements through CalOES for projects approved under state or federal disaster declaration.

Ensure Timely and Multi-Year Tax Backfills

Disasters significantly reduce property tax, sales tax, and transient occupancy tax revenue, which are critical funding sources for county services. CSAC supports fully and promptly backfilling lost tax revenues to ensure counties have the resources necessary to provide essential services. Initial payments should be made at the start of the fiscal year to prevent cash flow issues. Furthermore, given that rebuilding takes years, tax backfill funding must extend beyond a single fiscal year to support long-term recovery.

Relief Should Reflect Community Impact, Not Just Cost

Current disaster relief packages create an arbitrary threshold that disadvantages smaller communities. CSAC supports reforms that allow disaster aid to reflect true community loss, including the severity of the event, extent of damage, and disproportionate impacts. Establishing consistent, equitable triggers for disaster assistance will help all counties recover more quickly and effectively.

Waive or Defer Mandate Program Audits during Disaster Recovery

Counties manage numerous state-mandated programs that are disrupted during large-scale disasters. CSAC supports an 18-month deferral of audits for these programs in disaster-impacted counties. This grace period will enable counties to focus limited staff and resources on immediate response and recovery efforts.

Allow Counties to Administer Disaster Recovery Funds

Counties are on the front lines, with deep knowledge of their communities and trusted networks in place. CSAC supports allowing counties to directly administer disaster recovery funds - or partner with local organizations - to ensure rapid, responsive, and community-centered relief.

Shift to an Up-Front Funding Model

Counties are often required to front disaster response costs, such as debris removal, with the anticipation that state and federal partners will reimburse 75% of these costs. Reimbursements can take years and may not fully cover costs. CSAC urges a shift to an up-front funding model and a reduced local cost share to accelerate recovery and reduce fiscal strain on counties.

Reform Housing Regulations to Support Disaster Recovery

Annual Progress Reports (APR)

County planning departments are required to provide detailed information to the California Department of Housing and Community Development on their progress toward meeting their pre-disaster Housing Element after a disaster. These reports divert county planning staff from critical rebuilding efforts. CSAC supports reassessing APR requirements post-disaster to ensure priorities align with immediate recovery needs.

RHNA Deadline Extension

Counties recovering from disasters face long-term regional shifts in economies and infrastructure, yet they receive no reprieve from housing element update deadlines under RHNA. To ensure thoughtful recovery, counties should receive a four-year extension if a disaster occurs within three years of their deadline. This will allow for comprehensive damage assessment, strategic rebuilding, and sustainable planning to prevent rushed housing plans that do not reflect community needs.

RHNA Target Suspension in Disaster Areas

Requiring counties to meet RHNA targets in disaster-stricken areas diverts critical resources from immediate recovery. Disasters displace residents and damage essential infrastructure, making pre-disaster housing plans obsolete. Suspending RHNA obligations in affected areas allows counties to focus on urgent housing needs and infrastructure restoration, ensuring a more effective long-term recovery. CSAC supports granting counties flexibility in RHNA compliance by extending deadlines and suspending obligations in disaster-impacted areas to support strategic, resilient rebuilding efforts.

No Net Loss Rule

Under the state’s ‘No Net Loss’ rule, counties must maintain enough sites to meet their remaining unmet housing allocation for each income category throughout their housing element cycle. Any zoning changes that reduce housing capacity – such as permanently prohibiting construction in high-risk fire zones, expanding defensible space, or dedicating land for resilience purposes – require identifying and rezoning an equivalent amount of land elsewhere. The current exemption process is overly complex and exposes counties to a myriad of civil lawsuits. Given the need to ‘build back better,’ modifications to this law are necessary to allow for flexible, risk-informed recovery planning in disaster-affected areas.

Expanding Los Angeles Wildfires Executive Orders Statewide

CSAC advocates for automatic rebuilding and recovery streamlining measures for any region affected by disaster – mirroring the Executive Orders issued for the 2025 Los Angeles County Wildfires and post-flood disasters in 2023. Establishing consistent, pre-approved rebuilding processes will enhance recovery efficiency and resilience, allowing communities to rebuild faster and stronger.

Similar exemptions need to be considered after each event, across each county, such as:

CEQA Exemption for Timberlands Fuels Reduction

Authorizes projects exclusively for noncommercial wildfire fuels reduction in timberland, paid for in part or in whole with public funds, to prepare a timber harvesting plan as an alternative to complying with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and requires these projects to be regulated as timber operations.

Permitting Exemption for Controlled Burns

Requires air quality management districts to process a permit for a smoke management plan within ten business days.

Reduce Red Tape for Coastal Fire Prevention

Exempts fuel treatment projects from Coastal Commission permitting mandates.

Exempt Roadside Wildfire Prevention Projects from CEQA

Streamline permitting fire, thinning, or fuel reduction projects to protect communities with only one fire evacuation route.

What Has CSAC Been Doing on Disasters?

CSAC serves as a resource for counties, advocating for policies that strengthen disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. Through collaboration with federal, state, and local partners, CSAC provides a platform for counties to share best practices, navigate recovery challenges, and influence federal and state policy decisions.



Statewide Webinar on Local Government Best Practices Following Natural Disasters

In partnership with U.S. Senator Alex Padilla, CSAC hosted a webinar featuring experts from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Region IX, CalOES, and the National Association of Counties. The discussion focused on lessons learned and strategies for effective disaster response.



FEMA Reimbursement Workshop at CSAC's 130th Annual Meeting

The workshop provided county leaders and staff an opportunity to engage directly with key officials, including FEMA Region IX Director Bob Fenton and CalOES Director Nancy Ward, to address challenges in securing disaster reimbursement.



Ongoing Collaboration with the Department of Water Resources

CSAC continues to work with the Department of Water Resources to support county-level planning for drought emergencies in alignment with SB 552.



Wildfire Insurance Advocacy

CSAC convened the 2024 Insurance Working Group to focus on the growing challenges homeowners face in securing wildfire insurance. The working group identified four key principles to streamline access to affordable insurance:

1. Rewarding Resilience & Risk Mitigation Work
2. Transparency & Education
3. Adequate Departmental Resources & Staffing
4. Federal Engagement

CSAC Insurance Working Group Policy Priorities

As Of October 31, 2024



In 2024, the CSAC Insurance Working Group was formed to develop an advocacy plan on the detrimental impacts to counties created by a lack of available and affordable insurance options, especially as related to wildfire. The Working Group created the following Policy Principles to guide CSAC's advocacy moving forward:

1. Rewarding Resilience & Risk Mitigation Work

Counties across the state are building resilience through risk mitigation work, however, communities are not seeing the benefits of this work reflected in the cost and availability of insurance coverage. The state must develop clear mitigation standards and transparency on how the mitigation work will impact the availability and affordability of insurance policies. CSAC supports:

- The development of comprehensive standards to ensure that mitigation and resilience work completed at the community, landscape, regional, and wildfire home hardening levels result in direct increase of availability and affordability of insurance policies.
- Data sharing from risk models to help guide mitigation work.
- Clear, consistent education for policyholders on how to meet mitigation standards.
- Permit streamlining for vegetation management projects to lower cost barriers for risk reduction projects.
- Utilizing existing data collection efforts to minimize duplication of work.

One of the biggest barriers to completing more risk mitigation work is funding. Counties have invested heavily to build out community resilience and it is critical that all levels of government share the cost of this work. CSAC supports:

- Ongoing, sustainable state and federal funding to maximize community resilience, especially in the form of direct funding to counties.
- State and federal assistance to residents for mitigation work, including assistance for home hardening, via direct funding or tax credits.
- Ongoing, sustainable federal funding for vegetation management on federal lands that protects homes and communities.

2. Transparency & Education

Home insurance companies are utilizing many data points, including new technology like drone and satellite imagery, to decide whether to insure homes. While the insurance industry has said this facilitates the establishment of rates that better reflect a property's risk, little is shared with consumers about how companies reach these conclusions. More disclosure is necessary when assessing risk scores affecting a policyholder's affordability and accessibility. CSAC supports transparency in:



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