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Testimony

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Chairman Joe Neguse

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Committee on Natural Resources

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Introduction

Thank you, Chair Neguse and Ranking Member Fulcher and members of the Subcommittee, for the opportunity to testify regarding federal wildland firefighting workforce reform and Forest Service, forest management in California.

I serve as President/CEO for the California Forestry Association (Calforests).

Calforests Background

Calforests consists of private industrial forest owners and managers, sawmills, veneer mills, and several biomass powerplants. Our members are committed sustainable management of our private forest resources and supporting active forest management of National Forests within California. Cumulatively our members own and management in excess of 3.5 million acres in California.

California Wildfire Recent History

Over the last many summers, California's wildfire season has unfortunately made national headlines. But for those of us in California, this isn't about headlines. It is affecting the air we breathe, the carbon emissions reductions we have made, the lands we recreate in, the water resources we depend on and – for Calforests' members – the timberlands they own and manage to generate renewable forests products that society depends on.

In the last four years, the state has experienced its seven largest wildfires in modern history, with this year's Dixie Fire appearing to come just short of eclipsing last year's August Complex which burned over 1 million acres. Since 2020, more than 4.5 million forested acres of U.S. Forest Service land have burned, with hundreds of thousands of

private forest land, many of which are Calforests members – have burned in this same time period.

As importantly, though, these wildfires have resulted in the emission of unacceptable levels of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, particulate matter and other air pollutants. Costs associated with these wildfires are estimated to exceed \$17 billion dollars.

Things must change and I am prepared to discuss some of the necessary steps that must be taken.

Focus Points for this Testimony

- 1) The support for addressing the workforce challenges facing our wildland firefighters, and
- 2) Stress the importance of promoting active forest management to reduce the impacts to natural resources as well as losses of lives, communities and other assets at risk.

Firefighter workforce reform –

Calforests supports the moving the federal fire force to a full time permanent professional firefighter workforce. This shift in employment status would make personnel more readily available for wildfire suppression efforts during the Fire Season, but as importantly, the conduct of fuels reduction work for periods of time that are outside of the fire season. Adopting this change in employment status would increase the effectiveness of the USFS and, moreover, should provide for higher levels of cooperation between California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) and the USFS.

With this professionalization of the firefighting workforce, along with the other improvements being made to their pay structures, we have an

expectation that federal wildfire suppression strategies will be adjusted to match those of their state counterparts like CAL FIRE.

The burning conditions we have been experiencing in California for the last several summers have been unprecedented. Fire suppression tactics and strategy must be re-evaluated in light of the fire behavior we have experienced. Greater reliance on direct attack, and less reliance on the use of backfires, will, in our view, result in fewer acres of public and private forestlands being severely impacted by wildfire. The USFS took initial steps in this direction in August when Chief Moore issued a directive to suspend prescribed fires, but further action is necessary. Calforests is hopeful this committee will take a leadership role in promoting further change in fire suppression philosophy that is adapted to the burning conditions our firefighters can expect to continue to contend with into the future.

Forest Management Focused on Wildfire Prevention –

In March 2011, Chief Moore, in his former role as Regional Forester declared that the Forest Service must target at least 500,000 acres/year for fuel hazard reduction on the National Forests in California (Region 5). If implemented, this “Leadership Intent”¹ provides the opportunity over the next 15-20 years to conduct fuels reduction on all 9.1 million acres of productive, unreserved forest land on California’s National Forests.

Within USFS Region 5, the average acres of fuels reduction between the years of 2016 - 2020 has been 267,205 acres (See Figure 1). The pace and scale of the treatments accomplished must increase dramatically to not only meet desired targets, but also actively protect critical habitat,

¹R5 Ecological Restoration - Leadership Intent” Paper. Page 3.
(https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5411383.pdf)

water resources, timber resources, adjacent communities, and private timberlands.

Since 2011, the USFS, Region 5, has not been able to attain the treatment goals, while in contrast, the acres impacted from wildfire climb drastically, continually setting new records for burned acres on an annual basis. Over 10 million acres on the USFS Region 5 National Forests have experienced wildfire over the past 20 years.

Cooperation on Wildfire Prevention and Species Conservation in California -

With coordinated planning and implementation across the landscapes and ownerships, it is possible to reduce the severity and scale of these fires. Calforests members understand and consistently engage in cooperative efforts.

Most notably, our member companies are working with the USFS and CAL FIRE through a Memorandum of Understanding to assist in the protection and enhancement California's forest resources through active forest management activities like thinning, shaded fuels breaks and prescribed burns. Joining them in this effort is the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF). Calforests member companies have contributed millions of dollars to this effort, with a significant portion of these funds being leveraged to continue this work through state and federal funding mechanisms to develop and complete fuels breaks at the landscape level (Refer to Figure 3).

This work started with a focus on helping restore and protect areas where the northern & California spotted owls are at risk of being impacted by wildfire. However, this strategic conservation framework is also designed to help protect communities, water infrastructure and other at-risk species, making it the largest public/private- partnership between federal, state and private partners committed to protecting people, wildlife & water from wildfire.

On August 12, 2020, the USFS, Pacific Southwest Region, and the State of California entered into an “Agreement for Shared Stewardship of California’s Forest and Rangelands.”².

The agreement commits to restoring healthy forests and rangelands in California through actions including vegetation treatments of one million acres per year by 2025 (500,000 acres USFS and 500,000 acres state and private lands). Calforests strongly supports this cooperative effort as well given that this joint target for treated acres is likely the minimum necessary to achieve meaningful outcomes to reduce the devastating impacts from wildfires within California.

Lastly, the State of California has recently made changes necessary to allow for expansion of the use of Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) projects as well. Calforests supports the goals and objectives of GNA, Master Stewardship Agreements and Shared Stewardship Agreements. We urge a higher use of these programs to further achieve the state and federal goals of meeting treatment targets.

Summary and Conclusion

A permanent full-time professional USFS fire workforce will lead to substantial improvement in efficiency and effectiveness in fire preparedness, fire suppression, and fuels reduction. This should be paired with an expectation that federal wildfire suppression strategies take more of a direct attack to containing and suppressing fires during fire season.

² (<https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/8.12.20-CA-Shared-Stewardship-MOU.pdf> Accessed October 15, 2021)

Both the State and the USFS, along with its partners are striving to each reach a goal of 500,000 acres per year of fuels reduction by 2025. Calforests supports this effort, but also supports an expedited action to reach these goals more readily. Achieving these target treatment goals will result in a dramatic improvement in vegetation condition, which will lead to a reduction in large wildfires and the associated impacts, which include environmental, social, and fiscal impacts that are clearly unacceptable. This dual mission will help to arrest the decline in forest health that has led to consecutive, record-breaking fire seasons, which threatens nearly all aspects of the lives of our fellow Californians.

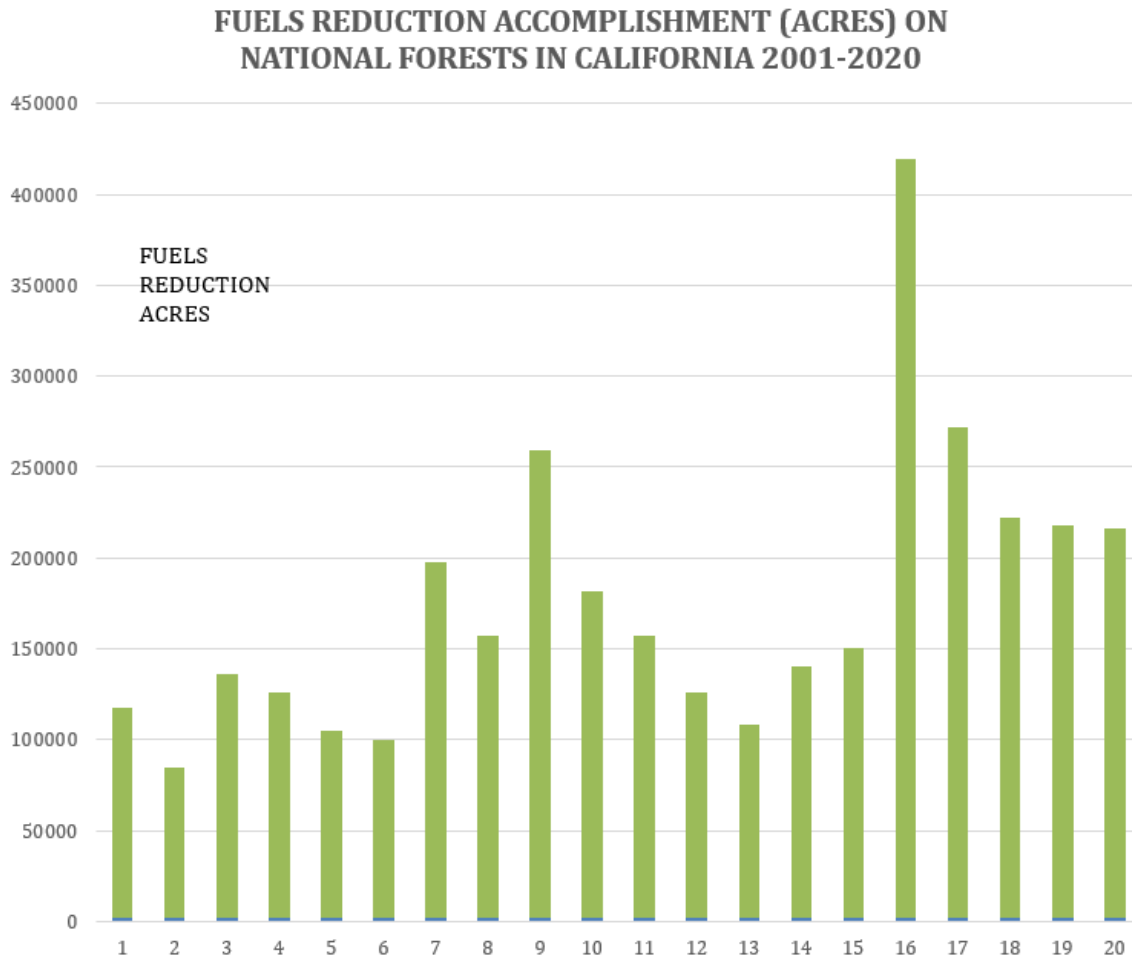
Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on this critical issue.

MATT DIAS
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Appendix

- 1) **Figure 1:** Total USFS, Region 5, Acres Treated Annually (2001-2020)
- 2) **Figure 2:** Acres Burned on USFS Region 5 lands within California
- 3) **Figure 3:** Examples of Fuel Treatments conducted under the existing Memorandum of Understanding between Private, State and Federal partners
- 4) **Figure 4:** USFS Pacific Southwest Region Fuels Treatment Acres, 2001-2020
- 5) **Figure 5:** USFS, Pacific Southwest Region and Rest of State Acres Burned 2001-2021

Figure 1: Total USFS, Region 5, Acres Treated Annually (2001-2020)



Note: Average treatment over 20 years (2001-2020) = 175,000 acres

Note: Average treatment for years 2016-2020 = 267,205 Acres

Figure 2: Acres Burned on USFS Region 5 lands within California

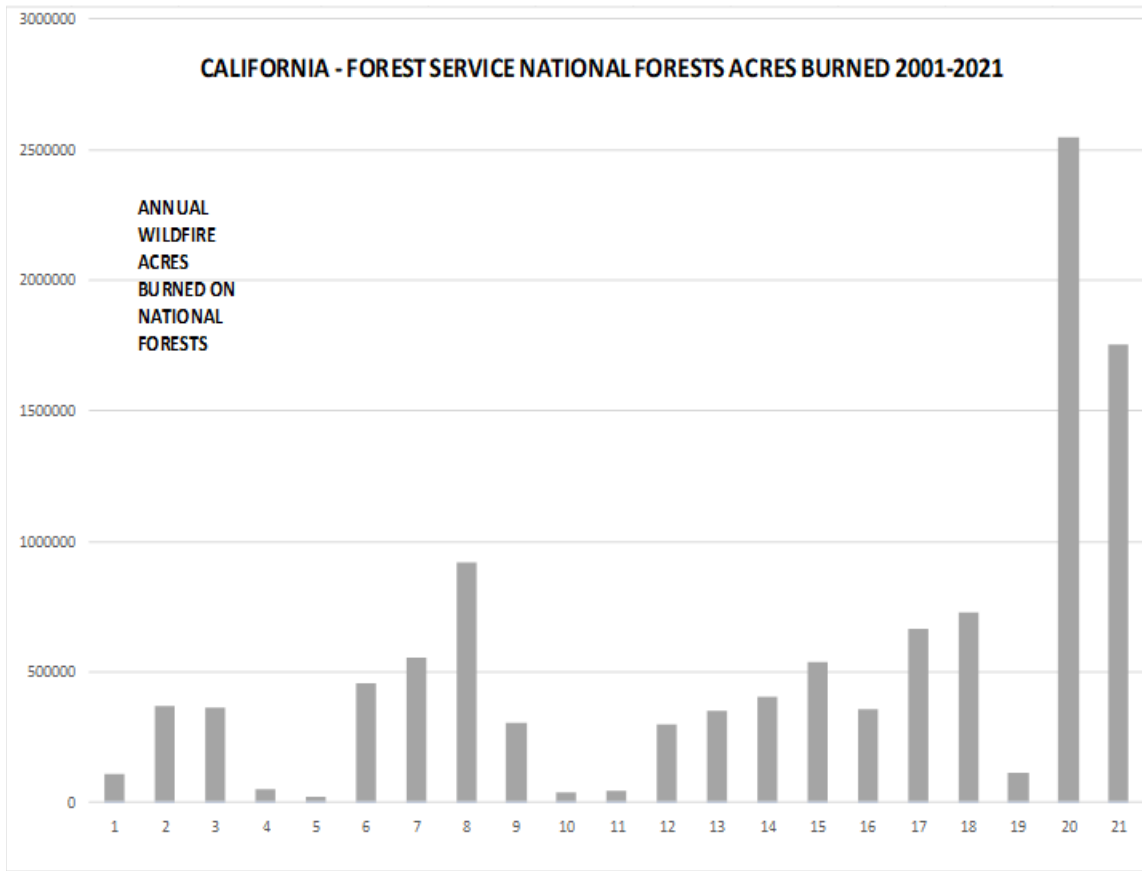


Figure 3: Examples of Fuel Treatments conducted under the existing Memorandum of Understanding between Private, State and Federal partners



Figure 4: USFS Pacific Southwest Region Fuels Treatment Acres, 2001 - 2020

Pacific Southwest Region (R5) Hazardous Fuels Reduction Accomplishments (acres) (17 years FY 2001 - 2020)												
(Source is the Forest Service National Fire Plan Operations & Reporting System (NFPORS) database)												
Fiscal Year	National Forest System (NFS) lands						Sub-total		NFS total	Non-NFS Lands	ALL LAND	TOTALS
	Mechanical	Prescribed Fire		Other*		NFS WUI	NFS Non-WUI	(WUI & Non-WUI)	(SFA and other)**	Total	Total	
	WUI	Non-WUI	WUI	Non-WUI	WUI	Non-WUI			WUI	WUI	(WUI + Non-WUI)	
2020									213,842			
2019									215,677			
2018									219,781			
2017	59,616	36,226	18,994	24,781	5,858	124,056	84,468	185,063	269,531	40,968	125,436	310,499
2016	62,433	71,894	15,371	20,565	208,910	38,019	286,714	130,478	417,192	17,001	303,715	434,193
2015	54,404	45,541	18,537	18,158	3,686	8,053	76,627	71,752	148,379	48,713	125,340	197,092
2014	48,754	47,438	9,346	14,968	40	18,127	58,140	80,533	138,673	60,936	119,076	199,609
2013	46,116	39,911	12,194	8,006	137	235	58,447	48,152	106,599	21,354	79,801	127,953
2012	43,153	46,769	13,760	19,273	-	1,073	56,913	67,115	124,028	28,377	85,290	152,405
2011	57,036	42,546	18,686	15,091	97	21,406	75,819	79,043	154,862	31,686	107,505	186,548
2010	54,195	69,650	17,954	22,937	25	14,994	72,174	107,581	179,755	103,697	175,871	283,452
2009	64,025	93,932	21,634	22,584	3,628	51,265	89,287	167,781	257,068	69,784	159,071	326,852
2008	46,391	52,665	19,563	16,994	3,913	15,516	69,867	85,175	155,042	166,122	235,989	321,164
2007	45,080	70,840	41,245	19,504	18,067	900	104,392	91,244	195,636	12,803	117,195	208,439
2006	27,129	17,397	20,619	15,703	5,017	12,195	52,765	45,295	98,060	31,819	84,584	129,879
2005	35,044	23,641	23,860	17,705	190	2,499	59,094	43,845	102,939	14,491	73,585	117,430
2004	45,836	21,241	28,125	17,889	974	10,095	74,935	49,225	124,160	2,710	77,645	126,870
2003	31,382	20,657	30,746	26,722	1,306	23,173	63,434	70,552	133,986	1,650	65,084	135,636
2002	12,852	24,880	19,813	24,834	500	15	33,165	49,729	82,894	-	33,165	82,894
2001	26,817	50,476	22,225	15,512	300	71	49,342	66,059	115,401	-	49,342	115,401
Total	760,263	775,704	352,672	321,226	252,648	341,692	1,365,583	1,438,622	3,453,505	652,111	2,017,694	3,456,316
* Differs from NFPORS category by the same name; WFU is included in this category in this table.												
** Includes leveraged acres												
WUI = Wildland Urban Intermix/Interface												
SFA = State Fire Assistance												

Figure 5: USFS, Pacific Southwest Region and Rest of State Acres Burned 2001-2021

2001-2021 Forest Service, California Region and Statewide Acres Burned by Year Forest Service total acres burned are "forest land" (at least 10% tree cover)			
Year	Forest Service Acres Burned	Statewide minus Forest Service Acres Burned	Total Acres Burned Statewide
2001	106,798	222,328	329,126
2002	365,945	140,751	506,696
2003	363,964	429,438	793,402
2004	49,437	192,620	242,057
2005	19,583	183,171	202,754
2006	453,500	225,419	678,919
2007	551,932	535,178	1,087,110
2008	919,716	456,065	1,375,781
2009	305,371	100,214	405,585
2010	39,288	70,241	109,529
2011	41,777	85,077	126,854
2012	297,212	572,387	869,599
2013	350,642	227,033	577,675
2014	400,005	130,789	530,794
2015	537,446	355,916	893,362
2016	356,951	203,864	560,815
2017	664,660	601,564	1,266,224
2018	728,895	1,094,258	1,823,153
2019	112,399	146,749	259,148
2020	2,546,703	1,639,526	4,186,229
(As of Oct. 15, 2021)	1,753,205	741,969	2,495,174
Total 2001-2021	10,965,429	8,354,557	19,319,986
Avg 2001-2021	522,163	397,836	919,999

Source: National Interagency Fire Center Statistics & CALFIRE Statistics

The National Forests' total Acreage is 20% of total acreage in California.