

[Stockton Record Op/Ed, Thursday, Dec. 31, 2020](#)

For forests resilient to wildfire, the time for California to act is now

By Stuart Bewley and David Daley, Special to CalMatters

In California, we learn from every fire season. This year, the lessons have been abundant and alarming.

The primary lesson is this: Because we are confronted with climate-driven dangers beyond our immediate control, coupled with decades of management that has left our forests and rangelands in an unnatural state, we must take urgent action to address those things we can control – forest health, the condition of our landscapes and the resiliency of communities in fire-prone areas.

We know what this fire season has wrought. In the months of August and September five of the six largest wildfires in history scorched this state. Combined, those five megafires burned over parts of 22 of our 58 counties. All told, more than 8,200 fires blackened more than 4 million acres in California – more than doubling the previous record for any year. Even now in December, wildfires are searing parts of Southern California.

The toll on human life has been enormous. Over the last four years, the fires have claimed 134 lives and destroyed more than 44,000 structures, forcing thousands of families from their homes. Just a few months ago, millions of Californians in all regions of the state were enveloped for days on end by air so thick with smoke and ash that it was unhealthy even to venture outside.

The toll on wildlife habitats and watersheds has been no less severe.

We know that the effects of climate change have made every fire season increasingly dangerous, as temperatures keep rising, our wildlands become more parched, and extreme wind events become more common.

California is committed to doing what it must to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and prevent climate conditions from becoming even more calamitous, but these extreme conditions will persist – and continue to get worse – far into the future.

What we can control now is the conditions of our natural landscape. Urgent action is needed.

We have learned from this horrendous fire season that we need a new strategy. We must make additional investments and enact policy reforms to promote improved land management across California. We must proactively engage in land-management practices such as controlled burns and ecologically-appropriate grazing that have proven to reduce the impact and threat of wildfires.

We urge Gov. Gavin Newsom to seek a supplemental appropriation of \$500 million in January to provide critical funding to enable state and local agencies to take immediate actions to prepare for and prevent worsening fire events. This urgent appropriation would be in addition to fire-preparedness funding to be included in the 2021-22 proposed budget.

The coalition making this request represents a cross-section of organizations committed to caring for the health of California's natural resources and the safety of its people. It includes prominent environmental groups, the leading agricultural group representing California cattlemen, the California State Association of Counties and responsible-government advocacy groups.

Emergency funding appropriated in January should be directed to bolstering Cal Fire grants to promote healthy forests, thinning of brush and prescribed burns.

If we learned anything from the air-quality crisis that choked much of California a few months ago, it is that we need to be much more proactive about burning under conditions of our choosing, rather than to allow uncontrolled wildfires to burn largely on the hottest, driest and windiest days of the year.

Additional funds can also be smartly invested in programs to safeguard vulnerable populations in fire-prone regions, including the hardening of homes, creation of defensible space and improving alert systems.

We acknowledge and appreciate the efforts of Newsom's administration this year in fighting the disastrous wildfires in the midst of a pandemic. Unfortunately, the urgency of the COVID-19 crisis contributed in 2020 to the appropriation of insufficient funding for wildfire risk-reduction activities.

As the governor noted upon the approval of the first COVID-19 vaccines, “hope is on the horizon” in turning back this pandemic. Unfortunately, there is no hope of immunizing California from the harm of catastrophic wildfires. The best medicine we have to minimize their harm is to improve the health of our landscapes. It must be an urgent priority.

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