

AGENDA

ASSEMBLY BUDGET COMMITTEE NO. 3 RESOURCES AND TRANSPORTATION

ASSEMBLYMEMBER RICHARD BLOOM, CHAIR

MONDAY, AUGUST 28, 2017

2:30 P.M. - STATE CAPITOL ROOM 437

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ITEMS TO BE HEARD

3540 DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY AND FIRE PROTECTION

INFORMATIONAL ISSUE 1: OVERVIEW OF THE 2017 FIRE SEASON

The Subcommittee will receive a briefing on the status of the 2017 fire season.

BACKGROUND

Despite an unusually wet winter, 2017 has already seen a number of large and damaging wildfires demonstrating, yet again, that traditional “fire season” is starting earlier and lasting longer. The state has had more fires and more acreage burned so far this year than at the same time last year. As of August 1st, California has already experienced 4,625 active wildfires, burning over 309,687 acres.

Large fires that have already occurred in the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection’s State Responsibility Area (SRA) include the 10,343 acre Elm Fire in Fresno County, the 28,687 acre Alamo Fire in San Luis Obispo County, the 48,889 acre Garza Fire also in Fresno County, and the 81,826 Detwiler Fire in Mariposa County.

The majority of the fires to date have started in the grasses that spawned from the winter’s heavy rains and are now burning into the heavier brush and timber as the heat of summer lingers on.

STAFF COMMENTS

Due to climate change, weather conditions will likely become more extreme. These extremes are increasing the length and intensity of the fire season. This is evident in the pattern of wildfire season, which appears to be starting sooner, lasting longer, and increasing in intensity.

The costs of wildfires, in terms of risks to human life, property damage, and state and federal dollars, are devastating, and they are only likely to increase unless we better address the risks of wildfires. It is crucial to look at ways to build climate resiliency and adaptation moving forward. The subcommittee may wish to review ways to invest more in prevention methods to lessen the impacts of catastrophic wildfires.

INFORMATIONAL ISSUE 2: UPDATE ON THE TREE MORTALITY CRISIS

The Subcommittee will receive a briefing on the status of the tree mortality crisis.

BACKGROUND

California continues to face a tree mortality crisis. Experts estimate that 102 million trees died from 2010 through 2016 as a result of the drought, the effects of bark beetle infestation, and climate change. An estimated 62 million trees died in 2016 alone. Even with the above average rainfall last winter and spring, it is expected that millions of additional trees weakened by years of drought will die in the coming months and years. These dead and dying trees make forests more susceptible to destructive wildfires and pose public safety hazards from falling trees.

In October 2015, the Governor issued an emergency declaration directing state and local entities, as well as utilities, to remove dead and dying trees that threaten power lines, roads, structures, and critical community infrastructure. This emergency declaration also created the Tree Mortality Task Force (TMTF). TMTF is comprised of state and federal agencies, local governments, utilities, and various stakeholders that will coordinate emergency protective actions, and monitor ongoing conditions to address the vast tree mortality.

The TMTF has identified high hazard zones where tree removal should be prioritized for public safety. CalFire has tasked its equipment and personnel, such as foresters, hand crews, engine companies, and heavy equipment operators, to conduct hazardous tree removal and fuel reduction projects both independently and in cooperation with other federal, state, and local partners. The coordination provided by the TMTF between high hazard counties, CalFire, Caltrans, U.S. Forest Service, and the utilities increases the efficiency and effectiveness of these efforts.

In budget year 2016-17, CalFire awarded \$15.8 million in grants for 107 projects across 34 counties to support local efforts to remove dead and dying trees that pose a threat to public health and safety and reduce the threat of wildfires to homes. The 2017 Budget Act included \$10 million in local grants from the State Responsibility Area Fire Prevention Fund. This funding was directed toward tree mortality and fire prevention projects in tree mortality areas. An additional \$6 million was included to provide grants specifically to local agencies in counties subject to the tree mortality emergency declaration.

STAFF COMMENTS

A budget trailer bill in 2016 directed the Tree Mortality Task Force with putting together a report on the utilization of the dead trees. TMTF released the report in May 2017. The report provides insight into the viability of wood utilization opportunities and markets and an assessment of some of the high level barriers to further market development.

The Subcommittee may wish to ask for an update on the progress of expanding existing wood product businesses and/or developing new businesses using the feedstock from the tree mortality event.

INFORMATIONAL ISSUE 3: UPDATE ON THE USE OF PRESCRIBED BURN

The Subcommittee will receive a briefing on the use of prescribed burn.

BACKGROUND

Prescribed fire is a tool used to reduce the risk of large wildfires, to restore the ecosystem, to manage vegetation, and to enhance wildlife habitat. It also has application in forest management and rangeland improvement.

On February 27, 2017, the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee and the Assembly Committee on Natural Resources held a joint informational hearing on “Tree Mortality, Forest Health, and Prescribed Fire.” This hearing unveiled the need for the state to restore mixed-severity fire to California’s forested landscapes to address a legacy of highly-effective fire suppression which has resulted in an overgrown landscape.

The 2017 Budget Act appropriated \$10 million from the State Responsibility Area Fire Prevention Fund for CalFire to engage in fire prevention projects such as increasing the use of prescribed fire.

Vegetation Management Program (VMP) and Prescribed Fire

The Vegetation Management Program (VMP) is a cost-sharing program that allows public and private landowners to participate in vegetation treatment projects on State Responsibility Area lands. The primary tool used in the VMP program is prescribed fire. Currently, CalFire has 58 approved VMP projects covering a total of 64,472 acres. This is a 33% increase in burnable acres since February of 2016.

CalFire's 2016/17 goal was to complete 20,000 acres of prescribed fire. As of June 30, 2017, the Department completed 13,941 acres, 70% of the prescribed fire goal. Although just short of the goal, the Department increased the number of acres burned from 2015/16 (3,194 acres) by 372%. The Department continues to prioritize the VMP program and the development of prescribed fire projects as a primary tool to combat tree mortality and improve landscape level forest health.

To further promote the use of prescribed fire, CalFire has made prescribed fire a preferred activity in both its Forest Health and SRA Grant Programs. Both grant programs encourage and support projects that prioritize the use of prescribed fire.

This spring and early summer, CalFire participated in non-VMP cooperative prescribed fire projects with several different partnering organizations.

Some examples:

- CalFire Humboldt-Del Norte Unit participated in a Yurok Tribal prescribed fire project.
- CalFire Humboldt-Del Norte Unit participated in a South East Humboldt County prescribed fire with the UC Cooperative Extension.
- CalFire Sonoma-Lake-Napa Unit participated in a prescribed fire project at the Bouverie Preserve (Audubon Canyon Ranch).

Going forward, Chief Pimlott has again directed the Department to achieve 20,000 acres treated by prescribed fire in the 2017/2018 fiscal year. To further this goal, CalFire established an established internal working group to increase the pace and scale of prescribed fire. It is currently developing training and qualifications for personnel, parameters for carrying out prescribed fire when CalFire is not the lead agency but a cooperator, concerns surrounding liability and environmental review, ways to gain efficiencies in use of prescribed fire and how to best use resources to increase acres burned.

CalFire has been messaging more in traditional and social media about the importance of prescribed fire for fuel reduction and to restore a more natural fire regime to ecosystems. The hope is to earn an increasing social license for prescribed fire projects.

CalFire is collaborating with numerous other agencies and partner organizations around policy and projects related to prescribed fire. At the center of this is the Prescribed Fire MOU. CalFire is making use of the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) and the Wyden Authority to carry out projects across ownership boundaries with federal cooperators.

CalFire continues to prioritize completing the Vegetation Treatment Program Environmental Impact Report. This will make carrying out prescribed fire projects and other fuels reduction projects much more efficient by reducing the time it takes for environmental review, as a base level of review will be complete in the EIR.

Air Quality Monitoring

CalFire, California Air Resources Board and other stakeholders are working to identify means of improving the monitoring and assessment of health impacts from wildfire and prescribed fire to improve decision making that would ultimately increase the use of prescribed fire. Monitoring and evaluating smoke emissions from both prescribed fire and wild fire could allow air districts to refine burning restrictions, thereby increasing available burn days, which would aid in increasing prescribed fire projects.

STAFF COMMENTS

A century of fire suppression in California has created unnaturally dense forests, reduced tree diameters, and forest floors littered with shrubs and dead wood. Those conditions mean that wildfire, when it does happen, is more likely to grow into a conflagration that kills large tracts of forest, produces huge amounts of smoke, and threatens people and property.

Prescribed fires can help reduce the catastrophic damage of wildfire by safely reducing excessive amounts of brush and promoting the new growth of native vegetation. The Subcommittee may wish to ask CalFire what their limitations are to reaching their burn goals. The Subcommittee may also wish to consider how to use the State Responsibility Area Fire Prevention Fund to build resilience and maintain forest health in the face of climate change.