

AGENDA

ASSEMBLY BUDGET SUBCOMMITTEE NO. 3 ON RESOURCES AND TRANSPORTATION

ASSEMBLYMEMBER RICHARD BLOOM, CHAIR

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2020

10:00 AM – 1:00 PM, STATE CAPITOL, ROOM 4202

INFORMATIONAL HEARING: WILDFIRE MITIGATION MEASURES

- I. Opening remarks and introductions.
- II. Historical and current funding levels for fire.
 - a. Brian Brown, Principal Legislative Analyst, Legislative Analyst's Office
- III. Fire risk mitigation needs are dependent on variety of factors.
 - b. Nick Jensen, Lead Conservation Scientist, Native Plant Society
 - c. Michael O'Connell, Executive Director, Irvine Ranch Conservancy
- IV. CalFire's methodology for investing fire prevention funding.
 - d. Thom Porter or representative, Department of Forestry and Fire Protection
- V. Member comments and questions for the panel.
- VI. Public comment.

Due to the statewide stay-at-home order and guidance on physical distancing, seating for this hearing will be very limited. All are encouraged to watch the hearing from its live stream on the Assembly's website at: <https://www.assembly.ca.gov/todaysevents>.

Remote Testimony Stations (RTS) will be available for public comment. Please see the six RTS locations below and on the following page:

1. Sacramento – State Capitol Park, North Steps
2. San Francisco – State Office (455 Golden Gate Ave., San Francisco, CA 94102)

3. *Fresno – Hugh Burns State Building (2550 Mariposa Street, Fresno, CA 93721)*
4. *Van Nuys – State Building (6150 Van Nuys Blvd., Van Nuys, CA 91401)*
5. *Los Angeles – Ronald Reagan State Building (300 South Spring Street, Los Angeles, CA 90013)*
6. *San Diego – State Building (1350 Front Street, San Diego, CA 92101)*

The public may also submit written testimony to: BudgetSub3@asm.ca.gov. Please note that any written testimony sent to that email address are considered public comment and may be read into the record.

BACKGROUND

Wildfires in California continue to increase in frequency and intensity. Wildfires are sweeping and destructive blazes that can occur in forestlands, grasslands, deserts, shrublands, and brushlands. In California, wildfires have escalated significantly in severity over recent years, getting larger and more unpredictable.

Fires today burn twice as many acres and for twice as long as they did in the 1990s. On October 4, we surpassed four million acres burned in 2020. This more than doubled our last record, which was 1.8 million acres burned in 2018. Experts believe that a combination of factors will result in serious fire seasons for the indefinite future. Among other factors, three primary reasons why California wildfires have become more catastrophic include: (1) the climate is becoming more extreme; (2) more people are living in combustible places; and, (3) there is more fuel for the fires to burn.

In addition, the continued expansion of human development into previously undeveloped land plays a significant role in the destructiveness and deaths involved in recent wildfire events. On average, 95 percent of fires in California are caused by some form of human activity, such as: vehicle sparks, lawn mowers, faulty residential electrical connections, power lines, target shooting, fireworks, cigarettes, debris burns, campfires, and power equipment.

Wildfire statistics for years 2013-2020. The following table is a summary of the number of wildfires, acres burned, fatalities and structures damaged/destroyed over the last seven years. This data includes those managed by CalFire and other partner agencies.

Number of Wildfires and Acres Burned

Year	Incidents	Acres	Fatalities	Structures Damaged or Destroyed
2020 (as of 10/7/20)	8,320	4,040,935	31	8,891
2019	7,860	259,823	3	732
2018	7,639	1,963,101	100	24,226
2017	9,270	1,548,429	47	10,280
2016	6,954	669,534	6	1,274
2015	8,283	880,889	7	3,159
2014	7,233	625,540	2	471
2013	9,907	601,625	1	456

Source: CalFire.

Wildfire suppression and prevention costs. Over the last few fiscal years, fire prevention and suppression expenses have ranged between \$2 billion to \$3 billion with

fire suppression making up the bulk of expenses. The breakdown in fire funding for fiscal year 2020-21 is detailed in the chart below:

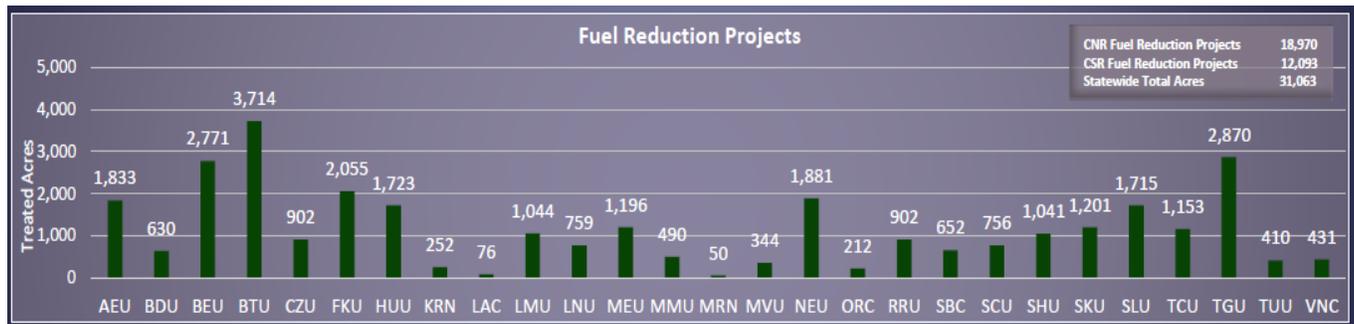
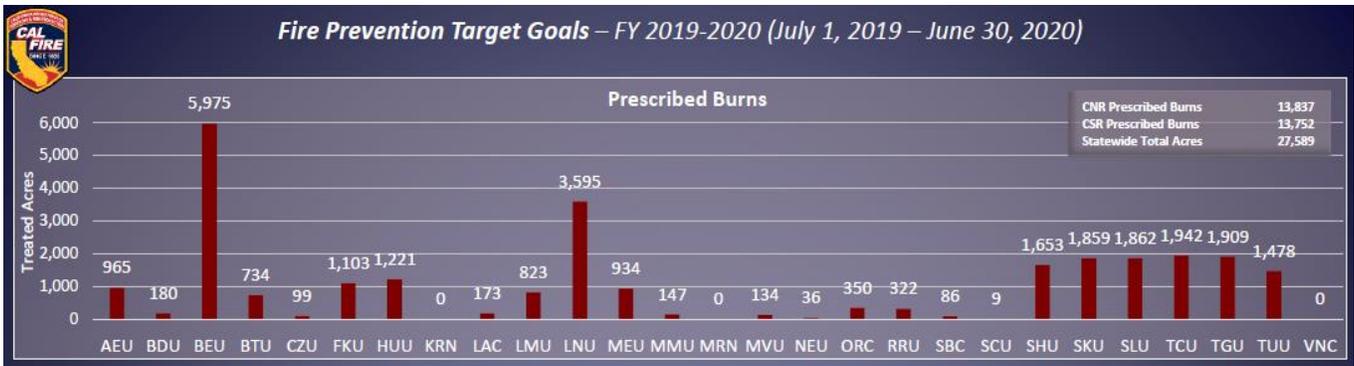
2020-21 Wildfire Prevention and Protection Funding Summary			
<i>(Dollars in Thousands)</i>			
	General Fund	Other Fund	Total
Cal OES Fire Preparedness & Response	\$88,855	\$1,176	\$90,031
CAL FIRE Fire Protection	\$1,640,042	\$530,689	\$2,170,731
CAL FIRE Fire Prevention & Resource Management	\$15,404	\$187,902	\$203,306
Total	\$1,744,301	\$719,767	\$2,464,068

Source: CalFire

CalFire's wildfire prevention activities. CalFire's resource management and fire prevention programs include forest and vegetation treatments, wildland pre-fire engineering, land use planning, education, and law enforcement. The purposes of these activities are to reduce the number of fire starts, create more fire resistant and defensible communities, and reduce the overall intensity of wildfire. Typical projects include: forest thinning, vegetation clearance, prescribed fire, defensible space inspections, emergency evacuation planning, fire prevention education, fire hazard severity mapping, and fire-related law enforcement such as fire cause investigation and civil cost recovery for negligently started fires.

CalFire Wildfire Prevention Activities

Fiscal Year	Prescribed Burns (Acres)	Defensible Space Inspections (Number of Inspections Performed)
2019-20	27,143	222,040
2018-19	31,305	204,341
2017-18	19,413	217,666



CalFire also operates the Fire Prevention Grant Program through the California Climate Investments (CCI). This grant program aims to reduce the risk of wildland fires to habitable structures and communities, while maximizing carbon sequestration in healthy wildland habitat and minimizing the uncontrolled release of emissions emitted by wildfires.

The types of CCI fire prevention grant program project types and activities include those related to hazardous fuel reduction and removal of dead, dying, or diseased trees, fire prevention planning, and fire prevention education. Examples of qualifying projects and

activities include, but are not limited to, the following: hazardous fuel reduction, fire prevention education, and fire prevention planning.

STAFF COMMENTS

On October 4, 2020, state officials announced a new milestone, that the state has now surpassed 4 million acres burned. This figure more than doubles the state's previous record, which was 1.8 million acres burned in 2018. Many often point to our history of fire suppression as the issue behind the catastrophic fires in California. However, some of the more disastrous fires in terms of loss of human lives and property are often fires that were driven and exacerbated by the wind conditions, not the excessive fuels. These fires occur in areas that have experienced repeated large wildfires due to similar repeated wind conditions.

A good example of this is the 2018 Camp fire in Butte County. The Camp fire started in an area that experienced 13 large wildfires since 1999. In 2005, CalFire released a fire management plan for the region, which warned that the town of Paradise was at risk for an ember-driven conflagration similar to the Oakland firestorm of 1991. The report stated, "the greatest risk to the ridge communities is from an east wind driven fire that originates above the communities and blows downhill through developed areas."

Another example of a catastrophic wind-driven fire is the 2017 Tubbs fire in Napa, Sonoma, and Lake Counties. The Tubbs fire began on the night of October 8 near Calistoga in Sonoma County under extreme fire weather conditions, with high winds and low relative humidity. The winds blew out of the northeast at 40 miles per hour, with gusts up to 75 miles per hour. The path of the destructive 2017 Tubbs fire mirrors that of the Hanley fire of 1964. The extreme wind-driven 1964 Hanley fire burned under similar conditions, across much of the same landscape and covered an area substantially greater than the 2017 Tubbs fire.

Generally speaking, fuel-driven fires are common in central and northern California conifer forests. However, historical management practices and the recent drought has resulted in the accumulation of high fuel loads. The high fuel loads are the dominant factor driving large fire events in these areas.

In contrast, fuels (though a factor) play a minor role in controlling the size of large wind-driven fires. Wind-driven fires are common in the western part of California, driven by the Diablo, Mono, or North Winds in the north and Santa Ana Winds in the south. These wind-driven fire events are most commonly caused by human activity and can become catastrophic in terms of loss of human lives and property due to these areas being more densely populated.

Therefore, fire prevention activities and fire management responses cannot be the same for both fuel-driven and wind-driven fires. Fuel treatments and prescribed burning are suitable mitigating solutions for forested areas and those affected by fuel-driven fires. While reducing the risk of wildfires in wind-driven fire areas will likely find more

success through preventing fire ignitions during extreme wind events, home hardening, defensible space, and other measures.

As we contend with the impacts of climate change and our increasing wildfire risk, we must take a closer look at how we invest in both fire suppression and fire mitigation/prevention.

The Budget Act of 2020 provided \$203.3 million for fire prevention and resource management. This contrasts with \$2.3 billion for fire suppression and response. We cannot endlessly increase our fire suppression budget. We can, however, do a better job at reducing our fire risk by increasing the pace and scale of our fire prevention activities.

As we approach a new budget cycle, this Subcommittee may wish to do the following: 1) consider whether our current funding levels for fire prevention is appropriate; 2) identify the gaps in fire prevention and fire risk reduction measures; 3) explore ways to catalyze regional collaboration and capacity building; and, 4) explore funding options for additional fire prevention investments.