

**STATEMENT OF CALIFORNIA FARM BUREAU FEDERATION
WILDFIRE SUMMIT – RURAL LEGISLATIVE CAUCUS
HEARING ROOM 4203, STATE CAPITOL
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SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA**

Introduction

My name is Kenny Watkins, and I serve as 2nd Vice President of California Farm Bureau. I raise beef cattle and grow alfalfa, processing tomatoes, walnuts and grain hay in Linden, CA.

I am pleased to present testimony on behalf of our 34,000 farmer and rancher members, who depend on managed, healthy forests and who are impacted directly or indirectly by wildfires. Farm Bureau is a non-governmental, non-profit, voluntary membership corporation. Farm Bureau strives to protect and improve the ability of farmers and ranchers engaged in production agriculture to provide a reliable supply of food and fiber through responsible stewardship of California's resources.

Impacts to California's farmers and ranchers

Farmers, ranchers, and private timberland owners are affected in unique ways by the occurrence of wildfires throughout the state. Our private forest landowners and livestock producers have been in the pathway of wildfires. Private timberland owners have often found themselves the victims of poor management and fire suppression activities on adjacent lands. In recent years, thousands of acres of citrus and avocado groves, and nursery operations have suffered losses due to adjacent wildfires.

Forest management also affects the water quality and quantity available for agriculture and forestry production, as well as for the citizens of California. Erosion and flooding are two other major threats following wildfires, as tree and plant root structures no longer exist to hold the soil in place. Most of our water supplies originate from forestlands, and we should recognize the negative impacts poorly managed forests and forest fires have on water quality.

California farmers and ranchers are working hard to reduce emissions. Let's not lose the gains we have made in improving air quality by letting our forests burn up and emit massive amounts of particulate matter and greenhouse gases. A recent study released by the California Forest Foundation assessed the greenhouse gas emissions from four fires that burned a combined 144,000 acres. These fires contributed to 38 tons of greenhouse gases being emitted into our atmosphere, that's the equivalent of the emissions from 7 million cars – for one year.

Public Lands

We are particularly concerned with the management of federal lands in California, which comprise fifty-percent of the state's land. Farm Bureau supports the multiple use of Forest Service and BLM lands, which is the mandate upon which they were established. We understand the challenge the Forest Service and other federal agencies face to make decisions based on comprehensive public input, and their obligation to defend these decisions in court. Unfortunately, more time and money is spent doing just that, than in managing resources on the ground. Timber management has declined sharply since the late 1980's due primarily to

environmental litigation. Declining management has resulted in an ever-increasing fuel load and poor road system maintenance. Poor road maintenance results in slow initial attack and lessens the ability to hit fires early and keep them small. For example, it took firefighters a day and a half to reach the fire line on the Klamath National Forest last month. All of these factors have caused the frequency, size, and intensity of wildfires on National Forest land to increase dramatically in the last 20 years. Unlike historical fires that helped rejuvenate the land, these fire storms cause immense destruction to watersheds, habitat, wildlife, and ecological systems, including increased timber mortality. In addition, they are increasingly costly and dangerous to fight. These lands used to be a national asset but increasingly are turning into a liability.

Grazing is an important management tool for fuels reduction. Grazing can reduce the fuel loading of understory surface fuels, which prevents the “fuel ladder” effect. It is a proven tool to help reduce the intensity of fires, and is an income generator rather than being an additional management cost. Another important part of management is reforestation following fires. In many areas of California, land must be replanted with trees and controlled for brush; otherwise, prime forestland is quickly converted to brushland.

Forest management is the key to preventing fires. Funding prevention measures is a much wiser use of limited funding than paying the cost of extinguishing fires, cleaning debris, and rehabilitating the land. A key preventative tool is the use of lookouts on both state and federal land. Many of our members attest to lookouts spotting fires early or sparing large dispatches when only a possible smoke check is necessary. Again, we recognize that funding is limited, but it can be used more efficiently in prevention than in reaction.

Farm Bureau is particularly concerned about fire management in designated wilderness areas, where activities such as fuels treatment, road maintenance, and motorized vehicle access are not allowed, making fire suppression particularly difficult. When fires do occur, salvage logging is not even allowed, so the dead wood continues to decay, contributing additional fuel load for the next fire. The judicious use of fuels reduction and salvage logging would provide local communities with jobs, economic stimulation and a domestic supply of wood products, energy, or other resources, while reducing fire danger.

The resource-dependent communities, which live within and around these federal lands, are most impacted by forest management decisions. They are the economic and cultural base of the area. Forest management opponents and wilderness proponents are typically the weekend outdoor enthusiasts, not the people who actually live, work, and raise their families in the community.

I am greatly disappointed by another unfortunate reality of wildfires on National Forest land: funding for rural schools and roads is going up in smoke. Had the National Forests been thinned for even minimal management over the past 20 years, rural counties would have received adequate funding through the National Forest revenue sharing system. Now these communities have been forced to ask Congress for supplemental funding – under the Secure Rural Schools Act – to fill this gap. The federal government has an obligation to compensate forest counties for removing these lands from economic development and tax generation.

The lack of forest management on public lands is costing taxpayers greatly, as expenses continue to increase for fighting wildfires, rehabilitating the land, providing disaster assistance, and other activities.

We are becoming a state, which, instead of responsibly using our own natural resources, consumes additional fuel to import them from other countries that have minimal protections for the environment and workers. In addition, science has proven that “hands-off” preservation is not necessarily the ultimate ecological scenario. In fact, human interaction can actually improve the ecological diversity and sustainability of a region. Certainly this year’s fire season is showing that California’s forests need our help.

Solutions

We believe there are some key Public Policy Solutions to these issues:

First, modify state and federal laws to accommodate the necessary forest management activities; Second, develop and sustain the infrastructure necessary to reduce fuel loads. For example, promote construction of new biomass plants, ensure a continual supply of wood to justify maintaining and building sawmills and biomass facilities, and provide assurances for individuals who will complete the forest management activities to justify the necessary investment in new equipment.

At the state level, Cal-Fire needs to utilize its Vegetation Management Program (VMP) - this is a valuable fuel reduction program that is vastly under-utilized. The Program allows Cal-Fire to cooperate with willing private landowners to control fuel loading in California’s foothills on a cost-share basis. Ironically, the Program was born out of a hearing similar to this after the fires of August 1977. Now is the perfect time to revitalize this program. Finally, it is important to coordinate local ordinances with state and federal requirements, so landowners and homeowners are encouraged to maintain defensible space around buildings.

Thank you for providing the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to working with you to create a better forest management system to prevent future catastrophic wildfires.