



February 21, 2025

The Honorable Scott Wiener, Chair of the Senate Budget and Fiscal Review Committee  
 The Honorable Benjamin Allen, Chair of Senate Budget Subcommittee 2 on Resources, Environmental Protection and Energy  
 The Honorable Jesse Gabriel, Chair of the Assembly Committee on Budget  
 The Honorable Steve Bennett, Chair Assembly Budget Subcommittee 4 on Climate Crisis, Resources, Energy and Transportation

**RE: Bond and Budget Request: Beneficial Fire and Wildfire Smoke Public Health and Community Resilience Investments for FY 25-26**

Dear budget chairs and sub-chairs:

The signatories of this letter represent conservation, local government, tribal, environmental justice, workers’ rights, and land management organizations across California. We are dedicated to meeting the fire challenge by learning to live with fire, including reducing risk of extreme fires by increasing the use of beneficial fire and efforts that manage and minimize the health impacts of smoke, especially for California’s most vulnerable communities.

California must do much more to prepare for wildfire. In recent years increasingly severe wildfires have caused dozens of fatalities with lasting harm to communities and ecosystem health, and massive economic losses. Wildfire has become a source of anxiety for more Californians than ever before. The recent losses in Los Angeles demonstrate the destructive scale and lasting impact fire can have on our communities. Our hearts go out to all those impacted, and we urge the state to act swiftly to prevent more extreme fire events. Neither our communities nor our landscapes are prepared for the future fire conditions that are upon us. In this letter we focus on the proposed budget, but the scale of the fire challenge clearly demands substantially greater investment and action – even beyond the increased fire preparedness investments of the last five years.

Our forests and landscapes provide critical values to all Californians, including being the source of most of our water. Unfortunately, many of our landscapes are unhealthy and vulnerable to extreme fire due to past management actions and excessive fire suppression. Managing landscapes to restore more natural conditions – including the use of beneficial fire in forests and rangelands – not only improves their fire resilience but also enables them to withstand other climate stressors like extreme storms or drought.

#### **Cross-cutting Issues:**

- 1. *Bond funding should lead to additional progress, not simply backfill previous appropriations.***  
*Voters approved Proposition 4 with the understanding that this would result in new and additional action on wildfire and climate. We are disappointed that substantial amounts of the bond are being proposed to backfill existing state commitments. The January budget proposal includes \$273 million that backfills prior General Fund commitments including \$68 million of funding for improving fire resilience on state lands, \$13 million for home hardening, and \$32 million for Watershed Climate Resilience. Funding all of these commitments from the bond rather than honoring the previous agreements deprives voters of the additional progress on wildfire that they expect from the passage of Prop 4. It results in at least \$113 million less investment in wildfire resilience and increases the vulnerability of homes. Backfilling prior appropriations is a retreat from wildfire preparedness when we need to be accelerating progress.*
- 2. *Ensure consistent methods and metrics to track the impact of bond investments***  
*The Administration has expressed its intent to establish a meaningful process to assess the outcomes of climate bond funding, which is important given that 40% of the funds must provide “meaningful and direct benefits” to vulnerable populations and disadvantaged communities. We look forward to collaborating with the Administration and the Legislature to ensure a well-designed process that collects useful data about all bond expenditures.*
- 3. *Invest in building a skilled workforce for fire resilience and landscape restoration***  
*California currently lacks the workforce capacity necessary to meet the scale of the challenge. We must do more across all aspects of fire mitigation, from home inspections and defensible space, to creating clean air refugia for vulnerable populations, to implementing beneficial fire at scale to restore resilience to our forests and landscapes. Achieving the necessary scale of action will require investing in a well-trained workforce with sustainable, long-term funding, including investments in training programs and facilities.*

## Enhance Forest & Rangeland Resilience via Use of Beneficial Fire

Notwithstanding the backfilling mentioned above, we are broadly supportive of the suite of investments proposed in the budget. We focus below on key programs that lack funding, or where there is a lack of clarity from CAL FIRE or other agencies on whether they plan to support these initiatives from grant programs.

- **Funding for Tribes to support sharing traditional knowledge about beneficial fire.**  
*California Native American Tribes have stewarded the state's lands and waters since time immemorial, largely through the cultural use of fire to maintain resilient landscapes for food, fiber, and safety. Tribes, especially those who have maintained a consistent tradition of using fire to maintain their ancestral lands, have cultural knowledge, skills, and place-based expertise that will be critical for restoring landscape resilience and restoring our human relationship with fire. Some Tribes and indigenous practitioners, notably the Karuk Tribe in the Klamath Mountains of northwestern California, have specific proposals that offer opportunities to develop facilities and training programs that can share their traditional knowledge, while also creating infrastructure to shelter vulnerable people during extended smoke events or other climate-driven disasters. The Legislature and Administration should prioritize supporting these multi-benefit projects through dedicated outreach, technical assistance in developing proposals, and where necessary aligning grant program applications and decisions to facilitate 'one-application and one-decision', rather than numerous applications to multiple programs for one substantial project.*
- **Support for better pre-fire planning as described in SB 1101 (Limón) BCP.**  
*Our organizations were very supportive of SB 1101 (Limón, 2024) to improve how California plans for and manages fire, and to increase CAL FIRE's use of prescribed fire. We support [CAL FIRE's BCP](#) for mapping and analysis to inform the proactive planning of potential fire boundaries. In addition to this computer-based initial planning it will be important for the Department, as part of its ongoing prevention activities, to utilize existing staff in units around the state for community outreach and engagement. Engaging the public around this new approach to managing fire is a critical CAL FIRE role, both to hear from community organizations and to educate about the need to embrace beneficial fire when conditions make it possible.*
- **\$1.5 million annually for a Prescribed Fire Training Network**  
*We support dedicated funding to build and maintain a collaborative prescribed fire training network throughout California, which would leverage and build capacity across NGOs, Tribes, and federal and state partners. In 2022, the state released the [Strategic Plan for Expanding the Use of Beneficial Fire](#), which identified funding for Prescribed Fire Training Centers in California as its first action item. California leads the country in innovative, locally based training programs (including prescribed fire training exchanges or TREX, cultural fire exchanges, and prescribed burn associations), yet there is significant need to fund a larger coordinating body that can connect the pieces and build a bigger program of training activities across entities and geographies.*  
*Note that the bond BCP associates \$5 million with a "Prescribed Fire Training Hub" but it appears the Administration proposes this funding for CAL FIRE staff positions, rather than funding the proposal developed over the past three years by the key stakeholders who are leading many of the existing efforts. CAL FIRE cannot do everything - it is important to also fund this network of key partners.*
- **\$2 million for the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources' Fire Network.**  
*The UCANR Fire Network inspires and empowers Californians to better live with fire through education and outreach, applied research, training and capacity building, and policy*

*engagement. The Fire Network has advisors and staff throughout California, providing statewide and local leadership on prescribed fire and fuels management, home hardening and defensible space, post-fire recovery and resilience, and workforce development and diversity. The state has provided one-time funding to the Fire Network in recent years, enabling development of the program, but stable funding is needed to support and build on existing staff and initiatives. The expanding footprint of the Fire Network will enable new partnerships and projects, bring funding and training opportunities to local landscapes, and continue to build a more fire-resilient California.*

### **Mitigate public health impacts from wildfire smoke and bolster community resilience, particularly for outdoor workers and environmental justice communities**

Smoke will be an inevitable part of our future with fire, but we can reduce its harm to public health. Monitoring and improved weather modeling allow us to choose the timing and location of controlled burns to minimize the impact of smoke on people, and planned burning reduces the smoke from future wildfires. While we should scale up prescribed fire as much as possible, there will still be high-impact wildfires and we need to take steps to reduce the health impacts of extreme smoke events, especially to our most vulnerable populations.

Exposure to wildfire smoke reduces lung function, exacerbates asthma and heart failure, and causes premature death in severely impacted communities. Those with greater exposure or sensitivity to smoke include people who work outdoors, unsheltered residents, rural communities, and people who manage lung and heart diseases like asthma. Importantly, these negative health impacts can be reduced when communities have access to clean air infrastructure and have the ability to stay indoors or reduce exposure during smoke events.

We encourage support of the following efforts to mitigate the health impacts of smoke:

- ***Fund clean-air refugia, including Climate Resiliency Centers in areas heavily impacted by chronic smoke.***  
*We strongly support expanding the creation of Community Resilience Centers (including retrofitting existing public buildings like libraries and fairground facilities) that can also serve as refugia where people can get respite from chronically smoky conditions, extreme heat events, and other threats.*
- ***Fund Home Weatherization programs to keep smoke out of homes.***  
*Programs such as the Low-Income Weatherization Program and elements of the Equitable Building Decarbonization program can provide cleaner air at home for vulnerable low-income populations by sealing the building and installing quality air filters. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has also been piloting a program to provide air purifiers to priority homes. These are simple, multi-benefit actions that are good for energy efficiency and reducing the harms from smoke, and they should be continued and expanded.*
- ***Pilot a program for public entities (such as health departments, local air districts, and nonprofit organizations) to provide and distribute N95 masks to outdoor workers, and assess outcomes and alternatives.***  
*People who work outdoors, such as construction and agricultural workers, can be exposed to particularly damaging amounts of smoke. Minimizing the smoke impacts to this population has proven especially challenging since the work must be performed outdoors and wearing a well-fitted N95 mask for a long day of hot manual labor is difficult. A pilot program could be an important first step in reducing harms to this large vulnerable population.*

Thank you for considering these recommendations. We look forward to working with the Legislature on wildfire resilience and public health policy and budget action, and commit to being an ongoing resource to the budget committees as the details of the budget become more clear in the coming months. Please direct any questions to Paul Mason at Pacific Forest Trust; (916) 214-1382 or [pmason@pacificforest.org](mailto:pmason@pacificforest.org).

Sincerely,

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