

# KEEP OUR FORESTS

## *A Declaration, and Call to Action, from California's Scientists, Land Managers and Former Government Leaders*

California is facing a forestry and fire crisis. Over the past 16 months, more than 6 million of California's 33 million acres of forestland have burned. At this rate -- which will only accelerate with climate change -- it's possible that in the next 10 to 20 years most of California's forestland will burn and, by mid-century, much of California's forests will be lost. Landscapes that have been treasured for centuries will be unrecognizable. The clean water, fresh air, carbon sequestration, forest products, recreation and biodiversity these forests make possible will disappear. And toxic air pollution and smoke will continue to choke communities across California.

With this in mind and with smoke still lingering in the air from one of California's worst summers of wildfires on record, a group of scientists, forestry and resource professionals and community leaders met at the Mountain House, located in the historic Venado district of West Colusa County, to set forth a credible action plan. These leaders shared their perspectives, catalogued the massive challenges facing the state and agreed on a set of principles to guide the management of our forests -- and most importantly, reached consensus on what must be done. What follows is the Venado Declaration:

### THE FACTS:

- **Wildfires are getting larger and lives and property are being lost.** California's [eight largest wildfires on record](#) have all burned over the past four years. Over the past decade, more than 43,000 structures have been destroyed and 173 lives have been lost.
- **Wildfires are burning with greater intensity, permanently transforming landscapes.** High-severity fire begets more high-severity fire, transitioning forests to shrubs and grasses over time ([Taylor et al. 2021](#)).
  - In 2021, the Dixie Fire grew 100,000 acres in one day—much of which burned at high severity.
  - The 2020 Castle Fire killed more than 10% of the world's mature giant sequoia trees ([Stephenson and Brigham 2021](#)), and more giant sequoias were lost to fires this year.
- **Wildfires are hurting our economy.** California's 2018 fire season led to nearly \$150 billion in economic losses, including \$27.7 billion in capital losses, \$32.2 billion in health costs and \$88.6 billion in indirect losses, impacting industries and sectors statewide far from where fires burned ([Wang et al. 2020](#)).
- **Wildfires are hurting our health.** Smoke exposure, even at minimal levels, can significantly increase risk of pre-term birth ([Heft-Neal et al. 2022](#)) and other health problems, including death. Many urban areas in California have seen [dramatic increases in smoke days in recent years](#), including San Jose (up 400%) and LA (up 230%).
- **Active and dynamic land management protects communities and improves forest health.** Active management, fire use and intact fire regimes can increase forest resilience, overcome the effects of climate change, increase water availability and biodiversity and mitigate health impacts of wildfire ([Taylor et al. 2016](#), [Koontz et al. 2020](#), [Stephens et al. 2020](#), [Burke et al. 2021](#)).
- **Fuel modification and home hardening can also reduce structure loss and save lives.** ([Knapp et al. 2021](#)).



## OUR PRINCIPLES:

- **Invest in sustained, proactive solutions that match the state's challenges.** Proactive investments need to be scaled to match fire suppression spending. In 2020 alone, more than \$5 billion was spent suppressing fire in California, but only a fraction of that was proactively spent on improving forest health, reducing hazardous fuels and bolstering community resilience. It's time to shift the fire paradigm from one of suppression and exclusion, to one of stewardship and adaptation.
- **Address forest resiliency on every acre.** We know that fire will eventually impact all of the landscape, so we must have a plan to address forest resiliency on every acre. Planned fuels treatments should include the use of fire whenever possible to increase the amount of forestland treated. For example, a proactive policy and regulatory strategy is needed to maintain future forest health. NEPA and CEQA should be updated to consider the detrimental impacts of decades of fire suppression on our forested landscapes and the importance of beneficial fire on maintaining forest health.
- **Partner and collaborate in new and unprecedented ways.** Living with fire and making this paradigm shift requires new, unique partnerships and necessitates co-ownership of fire management and shared responsibility across all levels of government and with private, tribal, and community-based groups. The focus should be on shared values, shared vision, and shared investments, with a central recognition that fire is a natural and essential part of the California landscape.
- **Redefine and broaden how success is measured.** Rather than simply counting acres treated, we should consider other factors, such as jobs created, people trained, increases in water yield, water quality, public health improvements, homes hardened and processing facilities developed.

## URGENT ACTIONS:

- **Spend \$5 billion annually on proactive management.** Allocate \$5 billion per year from public/private sources for proactive fuels reduction, workforce development, infrastructure, and other facets of community fire adaptation.
- **Build infrastructure to support this work.** Invest in strategically located infrastructure, including biomass facilities and sawmills, to process forest products, treat waste material, and provide energy.
- **Leverage R&D and new technology.** Invest in research, innovation, and technology to stimulate improvements in planning, new value-added products, and project coordination.
- **Increase the state's capacity to conduct prescribed burns.** Develop and fund a collaborative California prescribed fire training center that builds capacity for prescribed fire across federal, state, tribal, and private lands. Continue to support statutory liability protections and insurance solutions for prescribed fire practitioners in California.
- **Create jobs and train workers.** Invest in jobs and training programs to build a robust and diversified workforce. Jobs and training should service a broad spectrum of related skills and disciplines, including everything from fuels reduction and prescribed fire to public health and landowner and industry assistance.
- **Support initiatives to protect communities and property.** Invest in home hardening and community wildfire protection planning, and support 100% compliance in defensible space projects.
- **Amend and adapt state and federal law so it's consistent with the current crisis.** Reinterpret and implement state and federal laws within the current context of fire, climate change, and drought.

**California has always been a leader, especially on environmental issues. The scale of the challenge we face is huge and the consequences of failure are dire. It's time for massive action.  
Our choices are to do something and impact the outcome, or do nothing and watch it burn.**

**Edmund G. Brown**

Governor of California, 1975-83, 2011-19

**Ken Pimlott**

CAL FIRE Director, 2010-18

**Janet Barentson**

Chair, Aukum Fairplay Fire Safe Council

**Marshall Burke**

Associate professor of Earth System Science  
Stanford University

**Jason Carlson**

Vice President & General Manager, California  
Operations  
Green Diamond Resource Company

**Chris Chase**

General Manager California Operations  
Timber Products Company  
Michigan-California Timber Company

**Brandon Collins**

Associate Adjunct Professor  
UC Berkeley

**Nick Goulette**

Executive Director  
Watershed Research & Training Center

**Niel Fischer, RPF #2448, Esq**

Western Resource Manager  
Collins

**Don Hankins, Ph.D.**

Professor  
California State University Chico

**Jonathan Kusel, Ph.D.**

Executive Director  
Sierra Institute for Community and Environment

**Michelle Medley-Daniel**

Deputy Director  
Watershed Research and Training Center

**Malcolm North**

Dept of Plant Sciences  
University of California, Davis

**Lenya N. Quinn-Davidson**

Area Fire Advisor, University of California  
Cooperative Extension  
Director, Northern California Prescribed Fire  
Council

**Carl Skinner**

Research Geographer (Fire) Retired

**Dan Tomascheski**

Vice President Resources  
Sierra Pacific Industries

**Ryan Tompkins**

Forester & Natural Resources Advisor  
Univ. of Calif. Cooperative Extension: Plumas,  
Sierra, & Lassen Counties

**Yana Valachovic, RPF #2740**

Forest Advisor and County Director  
University of California Cooperative Extension-  
Humboldt and Del Norte Counties

**Michael Wara**

Director, Climate and Energy Policy Program  
Senior Research Scholar, Woods Institute for the  
Environment  
Stanford University

**Allison Wolff**

CEO  
Vibrant Planet