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[Home](#) / [Blog](#) / [California's Rural Counties Urge Forest Management Policy Reform](#)

CALIFORNIA'S RURAL COUNTIES URGE FOREST MANAGEMENT POLICY REFORM

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The ongoing drought, the continued mismanagement of public forestlands, and the nonsensical funding formula for fire prevention and suppression have led to a year-round wildfire season in California. As representatives of California's rural counties, RCRC continues to lead the charge on advocating for the reconsideration of forest management policy.

In addition to the economic and environmental destruction caused by catastrophic wildfires, recent studies are now pointing to wildfires as a major cause of Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions in California. California wildfires are increasing in both severity and frequency, and these "megafires" are proving a threat to our forests, watersheds, natural resources, communities, local economies, and now our statewide GHG goals. Our best natural carbon sinks have become some of our biggest net carbon emitters.



Through Assembly Bill 32, also known as the Global Warming Solutions Act, the state is mandated to reduce GHG emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2020. Passed in 2006, the bill assumed no net emissions for wildland ecosystems by 2020. A 2015 study led by the National Park Service and UC Berkeley, and funded by the California Air Resources Board, finds that wildfires and deforestation are contributing more than expected to the state's gas emissions. Published in the journal *Forest Ecology and Management*, the study found that the forests and vegetation of State wildlands stored an estimated 850 million tons of carbon in 2010. Unfortunately, those areas also accounted for approximately 69 million tons of carbon lost during the study's 2001-2010 timeframe. In fact, the study reports that the annual carbon losses from California forests and wildlands represent as much as 5 to 7 percent of state carbon

emissions from all sectors during this same timeframe.

While the release of carbon emissions from megafires are rising at an unprecedented level, meeting our statewide GHG reduction goals isn't even the most pressing issue related to the mismanagement of our national forests. Earlier this year, the Association of California Water Agencies (ACWA), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), and the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) issued a joint call for renewed attention on California's headwaters and the role they play in the state's water supply and ecological health. Each group launched independent but complementary efforts addressing headwater health as a critical component to managing the state's water resources, especially as we find ourselves in yet another year of drought.

Current state and federal forest management laws make it an ongoing challenge to complete forest management and fire prevention projects on public lands. The management of lands for fuels reduction on national forest system lands is wholly inadequate and underfunded, and has been ignored for far too long, placing California's rural counties at tremendous risk when catastrophic wildfires occur.

In order to properly manage our forested watersheds and meet the state's GHG goals, we need to address how wildfires are funded, and how to properly fund prevention and cleanup activities. The cost of prevention would prove to be a small investment relative to the skyrocketing costs of suppression. Twenty years ago, the USFS was spending approximately 15 percent of its total budget on firefighting; today they spend 40 percent or more on suppression efforts. Unfortunately, efforts to review and change the way wildfires are funded have so far failed, leaving our rural communities holding the bag when a catastrophic fire hits.

California's forests serve as a source of clean water, clean air, and unsurpassed recreational opportunities for the world's citizens – not just those living in California's rural communities – and the harm from catastrophic wildfire is equally widespread. The correlation between climbing suppression costs, reduced fuel reduction activities, and mismanaged watersheds is quantifiable and real. Numerous California organizations representing disparate interests all agree, and are individually and collaboratively calling for a heightened focus on the health of our forests and watersheds as a first step to helping reduce the severity of California's wildfires.



Patricia Megason is the Executive Vice President at the Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC) and is the author of the blog post. Learn more about RCRC on their [website](#).

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