



California on Fire - Rethinking forest management and disaster recovery to promote habitat and community resilience

California has faced the worst wildfire season in its history this year. Only last week was the sky a dystopian red color due to the smoke and thousands of buildings and homes were destroyed in a blink of an eye. Scientists predict that these fires are going to become more rampant and deadly each year. How did we get here?

The answer is decades of forest mismanagement compounded by the mismanagement of our climate. When the US Government first took over the management of California's forests, their first instinct was to suppress any fires that started. This technique resulted in forests full of overgrowth that now have a higher chance of catching on fire. California's ecosystems have adapted to experience regular wildfires and some trees, such as the ponderosa pine, even require fires once every 50 years to help with the pruning of old branches and allowing younger trees to grow. When wildfires do happen after decades of suppression, as they are happening right now, the fires burn at such high intensity and temperature that they kill even the fire-resistant vegetation.

Now that scientists and policymakers have realized that regular fires are necessary for ecosystem health, they have also realized that conducting controlled burns is becoming more challenging. Over the last few decades, people have slowly been moving into what is called the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), the land located in between wildlife habitat and human development. Their presence exacerbates the wildfire problem as forest management cannot conduct prescribed fires in fear of damaging the property of those living within the WUI area. Another issue is that of climate change. Climate change contributes to multiple aspects, all of which can make wildfires become more frequent and intense, such as higher temperatures, reduced snowpack, and a drier climate. Given all of these factors, there is a large chance that prescribed fire can spiral out of control and destroy nearby housing and habitat.

Given that prescribed fires are becoming a more difficult option, what can we do? One idea is to rethink how we can rebuild following a disaster. The current strategy is to rebuild what was lost as fast as possible. Not only does this strategy make little sense as the rebuilt housing is more likely to burn down again due to the frequency of fires, but developers are also very likely to take advantage of this situation. Projects defined as rebuilding lost housing are usually expedited, including allowing them to

be exempt from CEQA. Thus, such projects can be built without regard for climate and disaster resilience and other important environmental and community considerations.

An example of this is AB 430, legislation that passed in 2019 following the Camp Fire disaster. This bill provided full CEQA exemption for any housing project up to 50 acres to be built within the participating cities of Butte County in the name of “disaster recovery”. However, the bill did not define at all where and what could be built. It did not require any consideration of drastic affordable housing needs after the fire, nor any criteria to ensure the compliance with California’s Greenhouse Gas and Vehicle Miles Travelled reduction mandates. The bill also did not include any type of community engagement as a requirement, which coupled with the CEQA exemption meant that local communities had no say in their own community’s recovery. Despite strong opposition from PCL, this bill passed and set a difficult precedent on how to address disaster recovery.

Instead, PCL proposes that at-risk areas take a more strategic approach by defining a pre-disaster land use plan for recovery, perhaps as part of the jurisdiction’s General Plan. This plan would consider not only the specifics of how the area would rebuild following a disaster, but would also make sure that the rebuilding process complies with California’s climate, equity, and housing goals, specifically affordable housing needs. The plan would be an adaptable blueprint for the accelerated direction of resources and incentives in accordance with the specific needs after a disaster. The development of this plan should also involve the community as much as possible so that people living in affected areas can have a say in how they want to rebuild.

Although these types of pre-disaster land use plans would differ depending on the region, PCL suggests that every plan should:

- Be fiscally constrained,
- Be constrained to existing water supplies, with particular consideration of existing residents that lack safe water supply,
- Demonstrate compliance with state GHG reduction mandates, including Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) performance requirements and other location efficiency strategies,
- Discourage redevelopment in high-risk areas susceptible to subsequent disasters,
- Demonstrate compliance with the jurisdiction’s current Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) across income levels, including specific inclusionary and anti-displacement requirements,
- Develop post-disaster protocols for efficient recalibration of the pre-disaster plan that reflects the proportionate losses of housing across incomes, local business, services, and infrastructure,
- Include a robust community engagement process throughout the development of the plan.

These types of plans would help our communities rebuild but what about the wildlife that lost hundreds of acres of habitat to wildfires? There are a few actions California can take, both short-term and long-term, that would help wildlife recovery and for ecosystems to become more resilient to future disasters.

Short-term solutions would include helping to restore habitat and wildlife populations back to pre-disaster levels. This would include on-site work of planting trees to replace the lost ones and providing water and shelter for small animals and birds so that wildlife can slowly return. More long-term solutions would include restructuring our forest management policy in a way that builds habitat resiliency. This would include tactics such as making sure the Forest Service is well funded, regularly clearing forests of dry debris that is more likely to start fires, protecting water supplies such as rivers and groundwater, funding best forest management and wildfire suppression practices in habitat

areas, and conducting prescribed burns wherever possible. We also need to redefine how we use Wildland Urban Interface areas, including imposing restrictions on how many people can settle in these areas. Since most of California forests are located on federal public land, this revision of our current forest management policy would have to occur on a national level as well as the state level. **Finally, since climate change is a major cause of our current wildfires, making sure that California hits its climate goals should be the number one priority to reduce the scale of these disasters.**

One of PCL's goals in 2021 is to continue its disaster recovery planning efforts as well as to form a new program focusing on helping wildlife recover following a wildfire event. If you would like to support our efforts, please consider donating at pcl.org/donate.

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