

COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
WATER, POWER AND OCEANSCONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515

June 3, 2016

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

The state of California's forests has become dire as a result of the drought and bark beetle induced mortality. According to the United States Forest Service, last year alone saw the death of an estimated 29 million trees in California. In an effort to try to get out in front of this problem, I organized a Tree Mortality and Wildfire Workshop in Fresno, California on Thursday, June 2, 2016. The high level working group of local, state and federal partners included agency leaders who are part of Governor Jerry Brown's Tree Mortality Task Force that was put together last year. A main purpose of the Task Force is to address the crisis of tree mortality in the communities that could be most impacted in a 300 mile radius. Developing the best course of action includes having access to the necessary resources for the potential forest fires and the execution of a long-term plan for California's forests.

The workshop was successful in bringing forth what are believed to be best near-term steps that need to be taken at the federal level to help mitigate the crisis. First and foremost is the expedited removal of trees from the most hazardous areas – along roads, near homes and buildings, and around campgrounds. Further thinning of trees in the forests is necessary to reduce the severity of what can be catastrophic wildfires because of the density of the forests. Finally, greater incentives need to be provided for biomass facilities in California to continue operations to assist in the disposal of the dead trees.

The US Forest Service plays a critical role in assisting California because a majority of trees are on federal lands throughout the state. Greater dedicated funding for tree removal as described is the most important, but just as critical is expediting of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) project approvals. NEPA approvals have only been provided for 125,000 acres out of over one million affected acres. Mr. Secretary, the bottom line is that more federal resources are needed to carry out this effort.

Meetings and conversations I have had with US Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell and members of his regional staff, including Forester Randy Moore, make it clear that they understand the enormity of the challenge we face. This issue is not only plaguing California, but many Western states are dealing with the combination of impacts that drought and bark beetle have caused in their forests. To that end, the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation

and Forestry will be holding a hearing later this month to determine what we can do on the federal level to better complement existing efforts.

It is imperative that we work together at all levels of government, federal, state, and local, so we get ahead of this problem. Governor Brown, to his credit, in October 2015, initiated the Task Force by declaring a State of Emergency and is requesting a Presidential Disaster Declaration.

Therefore, your support and personal involvement, I believe, is very important. I hope we can have a conversation in the near future, so I can hear your thoughts on this very important issue facing California and our country. Thank you for your attention on this matter.

Sincerely,



JIM COSTA

Member of Congress