



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

December 1, 2015

The Honorable Edmund G. Brown, Jr.
Governor
State of California
Sacramento, California 95814

Dear Governor Brown:

Thank you for your letter of October 30, 2015, regarding your Declaration of a State of Emergency in response to the health and safety threat created by large-scale tree mortality California is currently experiencing. I share your urgency regarding California's forests.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Forest Service are aggressively working with your team on this issue, as described in this letter. But, the key to truly accelerating implementation of management and restoration tools is to fix the Forest Service's broken fire budget. With a record 52 percent of the Forest Service's budget dedicated to fighting wildfire in 2015, compared to just 16 percent in 1995, the Forest Service's ability to do more restoration work within the current budget structure is severely constrained by the increasing proportion of resources spent on fire. Stopping the chronic depletion of the non-fire programs will enable the Forest Service to restore an additional 1 million acres annually and 300 million board feet. Our ability to do more of the critical forest management and restoration that we all recognize is so urgently needed will continue to be limited unless Congress fixes the underlying budget issues.

USDA and the Forest Service continue to work with your team, including Secretary John Laird and CalFire Director Ken Pimlott, in implementing new provisions of the 2014 Farm Bill. After working with your team, Forest Service Chief Thomas Tidwell has approved approximately 5.3 million acres for designation as priority treatment areas under the 2014 Farm Bill. Section 603 of the Farm Bill provides for the potential use of a Categorical Exclusion in these areas, with specific limitations and requirements, including the requirement to maximize old growth and large trees to the extent the trees promote stands that are resilient to insect and disease threats, consider the best available scientific information, and develop projects through a collaborative process. We will continue our work with your team to determine the categorical exclusion applications to these acres.

In addition to these Farm Bill provisions, the Forest Service reached out to your staff to determine if we could use Good Neighbor Authority to more efficiently carry out forest restoration treatments across Federal and State lands. We hope to be able to finalize an agreement in the coming weeks.

Additionally, we are prioritizing funding and technical expertise to help the Forest Service partner with California in addressing this growing issue—this includes prioritized and dedicated funding for cross-boundary projects identified in High Hazard Zones. To respond to the insect and disease infestations designations, the agency is targeting an additional \$5 million dollars beyond the \$29 million already committed to the regional forest management budget. We will continue our emphasis on accelerating our restoration efforts to ensure long lived and resilient forested landscapes across California. As described in the recently released report *From Accelerating*

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Restoration to Creating and Maintaining Resilient Landscapes Across the Nation, collaborative landscape partnerships are essential to addressing the scale of forest health challenges we face today. Discussions amongst our teams have already taken place to look for landscapes where we might partner to implement forest restoration across Federal, State, and private lands in California.

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service is also part of the discussions with your team. NRCS is also addressing tree mortality on non-industrial private forest lands in California. A special fund is being set up within the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to treat dead and dying trees on 20,000 acres in the Sierra Nevada range, in the counties of Fresno, Madera, Mariposa, and Tulare. Discussions are in progress with CalFire on jointly funding positions to provide additional technical assistance. These efforts are in addition to the ongoing strong NRCS forestry program in California, which currently allocates \$6.5 million to regional forestry and catastrophic fire assistance, and employs five staff foresters to provide technical expertise on forest health issues.

We are also working collaboratively with your staff to conserve and restore the Sierra-Cascade California Headwaters, including a \$130 million investment by NRCS and the Forest Service to the partnership earlier this year. This partnership will help improve water quality and quantity, promote healthy forests, and reduce wildfire risk in the region.

Barriers to undertaking large-scale forest restoration treatments in California include depressed or limited markets for small-diameter timber and biomass. USDA, through the Forest Service and Rural Development programs, has made significant investments in biomass energy and promotion of wood use in commercial construction, including new technologies like cross-laminated timber that could help address seismic resilience needs across California. I want to applaud the direction you have sent to the California Energy Commission and the California Public Utilities Commission to accelerate the adoption of forest bioenergy. We welcome further dialogue with members of your team around opportunities to advance markets in connection with forest restoration goals and related policy initiatives under President Barack Obama's Climate Action Plan.

I appreciate your support for and understanding that one of the most meaningful steps we can take to fully implement these management and restoration tools and initiatives is to fix the Forest Service's broken fire budget. I hope that you can help ensure that your Congressional delegation is aware of the work happening in the State and the need to fix the fire budget.

Thank you for your continued partnership with the Department. I look forward to working with you to continue to advance solutions to our forest health and wildfire risk challenges.

Sincerely,



Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary