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VEGETATION MANAGEMENT PROGRAM 0356

FINDINGS 0356.1

INTRODUCTION

Historically, great changes have taken place in California's plant communities. Among the many causes of these changes, three stand out.

First, major vegetation changes were caused by the introduction of domestic livestock grazing and concurrently the introduction of Mediterranean annual grasses and forbs.

Another is the significant series of changes that occurred in the early 1930's with the beginning development of a State fire protection system. In 1932 there was a serious attempt made by the Board of Forestry to determine a sound fiscal system for handling the State's monetary resources and fire protection responsibility. A system also was established of hiring and stationing crews of firefighters throughout the State during the eight to ten-month fire season. And, in 1934, a Master Fire Plan study was initiated.

Wildfires were increasingly and routinely suppressed at all times and the practices of intentional burning by ranchers was discouraged by prosecution and billing for suppression costs of escaped fires. These policies were justified by the need to protect watersheds from wildfire, and from the floods and debris flows that followed them.

A more recent change has been extensive and intensive urbanization. The development occurring on much of the state’s coastal, foothill, and prime agricultural land has resulted in enormous vegetative changes and places significant restrictions on land management options.

Summary of Findings 0356.2

Overview:

A. California's growing population is exerting tremendous pressure on the State's natural resources. People are using more products and other benefits from the land. They are also demanding more space for living, working, and recreating.

B. Despite being the nation's most populous state, California retains extensive areas of rural and undeveloped forests and rangelands. Nearly 80 million of the state's nearly 101 million acres are considered forest and rangeland, including desert, mountain, wilderness, and other non-urban, non-agricultural lands.

C. The primary economic outputs derived from forests and rangelands are timber, firewood, forage, recreation, and water.

D. California's diverse forest and range cover types provide habitat for a large and varied array of wildlife species. Altogether nearly 650 different wildlife species are permanent residents or regular migrants of these lands. Vegetation age, density, and size class, as well as the composition and distribution of plant species, affect which wildlife species occur in an area. The presence of special habitat elements such as snags, downed logs, or water are required to support many species.

E. Both wildlife and livestock graze billions of pounds of forage every year. Limitations in topography, access, and forage quality and palatability prevent much of this production from being grazed or utilized.

F. Currently, about 22 million acres of rangeland are privately owned, and about 35 million are publicly owned. About 17 million acres of private rangelands are grazed by livestock. Federal BLM and Forest Service rangelands contain about 7 million and 7.6 million acres of grazing allotments, respectively. Areas too steep or rocky, or soils too poor for farming may still produce large quantities of grass and other vegetation. Cows, sheep, and goats are self-propelled harvesters. They convert this inedible vegetation into food for humans, as well as to wool and leather. The range livestock industry is a major source of both high protein and land management expertise.

G. California's Mediterranean type climate makes wildfire a major threat to the state's forest and rangeland.

H. Fires from lightning and those set by Indians, prior to European settlement, had pronounced structural impacts on the vegetation. The evidence of these impacts is clear from early-day descriptions and pictures of the vegetation and is reinforced by recent research contrasting the changes that occur in places where fires are allowed to burn, either naturally or under control, with the changes at sites where fires are excluded. (Biswell 1989)

I. Increased development and use of wildlands, the reduction of grazing, and the effectiveness of fire suppression activities have in many areas resulted in a buildup in forest and rangeland fuels. In this situation, given extreme fire weather, the threat of uncontrollable wildfire is great.

J. Fire protection responsibilities, including the Vegetation Management Program, are performed by some counties under contract to the State. These counties are known as Contract Counties.

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES 0356.3

A-1 Vegetation management is the planned manipulation of vegetation and/or growing conditions affecting vegetation to increase or enhance desired products or outputs (water, forage, wildlife habitat, recreation) or to protect the site from destructive agents (wildfire, floods, accelerated erosion).

A-2 Vegetation management activities include the disposal, rearrangement, or conversion of vegetation using various treatments.

A-3 Treatment methods and actions include manual, mechanical, chemical, biological (grazing), and prescribed burning.

A-4 Techniques of vegetation management treatment may be applied singly or in any combination needed for a particular vegetation type to meet specific objectives of resource management. Within existing physical, environmental, ecological, social, and legal constraints of the area to be treated, the method or methods used will be those which are most likely to achieve the desired objectives while protecting environmental quality.

A-5 The amount of herbicide used in vegetation management is extremely small compared to cropland use. Herbicides are often perceived by the public as dangerous, and their concerns have led to legal challenges. This will continue to affect the use of herbicides.

POLICY FINDINGS FOR PRESCRIBED BURNING 0356.4

B-1 Used properly under proper fuel and weather conditions, fire is a force for modification of the wildland environment.

B-2

B-3 Unregulated smoke from intense wildfires may concentrate and impact an air basin, whereas when fire is prescribed, atmospheric stability and wind direction are considered prior to ignition to avoid excessive problems in smoke sensitive areas.

B-4 The use of fire for any agricultural or other land management purpose is closely regulated by the State Air Resources Board (ARB), local Air Pollution Control Districts (APCD), and The Department. Some APCDs are now initiating fees for prescribed burning projects which will act as a disincentive to engage in controlled burn projects.

B-5 High-intensity wildfires can, in extreme cases, sterilize soils, destroy seed banks, and eliminate the ability of shrubs to resprout in chaparral ecosystems. . Conversely, fires that are too frequent can result in type conversions of chaparral to annual grassland across landscapes; creating fuelbreaks and a mosaic of seral stages across landscapes may help to prevent the spread of fire over large areas.

B-6 The rapid development of buildings in wildland areas has increased the damage potential of wildfires and has made vegetation management to reduce fuel accumulation more important.

B-7

B-8 An aggressive vegetation management program, coordinated with fire protection programs, can improve resource productivity and lessen the losses from the large high-intensity wildfires that have become increasingly common and destructive in recent years.

B-9

B-10 Proper prescribed burning can provide environmentally and economically sound ways to reduce the threats of fire and help advance many resource management goals. These include reducing fuels, increasing diversity of wildlife habitat, increasing long-term productivity of forest and rangelands, , improving air quality, reducing net carbon emissions over the long term, increasing forage production and maintaining diverse ecosystems.

B-11 Improved understanding of fire behavior and the development of fire modeling techniques have increased the safety and reliability of prescribed burning over the last decade.

B-12 In the past, the Department administered a Range Improvement Program for prescribed burns on private lands. A total of 2,660,000 acres were burned under this system since 1945. While initially successful in several areas, this program left the costs, risk of liability and responsibility for escaped fire suppression costs entirely to the landowner. Increased litigation led to a great reduction in the use of this program.

B-13 In 1981, the Department developed a prescribed burning program (vegetation management) that reimburses up to 90 percent of the costs, based on the degree of benefit to the public. Through mid-1987, more than 258,000 acres had been burned statewide under this program. While the program has failed to reach the program acre goals, it has had a positive effect in helping to reduce acres burned and in reducing suppression costs on several wildfires since the inception of the program. Treated areas are limited because of the high risks, and institutional and technical difficulties which accompany prescribed burning.

B-14 California has a currently stated goal of treating 500,000 acres annually, across all ownerships and jurisdictions, in order to reduce the threat of wildfire.

B-15 In December of 2019, the Board certified the California Vegetation Treatment Program (CalVTP) Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR). This document serves as a streamlined CEQA compliance document for fuels reduction projects on up to 250,000 acres annually. Total treatable landscape under the CalVTP includes 20.3 million acres of the 31 million acre State Responsibility Area. Available treatment methods include prescribed burning, mechanical treatments, hand crews, herbicides, and prescribed herbivory.

B-16 Various State, Local, Tribal, and Private entities may utilize the CALVTP to initiate or complete vegetation management projects throughout the state and contribute to the state’s vegetation treatment goals.

PRESCRIBED BURNING POLICY STATEMENT 0356.5

The Board supports and encourages the use of prescribed fire as a management tool on forest and rangelands. The Board strongly advocates the use of prescribed fire for fire hazard reduction, wildlife habitat improvement, watershed protection, reforestation, and range and livestock management plans. The Board recognizes that such fire must be carefully planned and controlled. Plans for the use of fire, as an integral part of land management activities, must be conveyed to and understood by nearby landowners, local communities, other cooperative fire agencies and the public at large.

In light of this statement and consistent with Board rules in Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations, the Board adopts the following vegetation management program policy statement:

I. The Director shall implement general program objectives that:

• Incorporate long-term vegetation management as an integral part of the Department's overall mission (*i.e.*, resource management, fire control, fire prevention, fire defense planning, etc.);

• Employ and promote principles of sound vegetation management practices to reduce wildland fire hazards, improve wildlife habitat, y, promote air quality, and increase forest and range productivity; and

• Reflect a vegetation management plan involving resource management and fire control professionals.

II. The Director shall:

A. Foster and encourage a vigorous program of vegetation management on public and private lands.

B. Continue to pursue adequate and stable funding to accomplish the program objective.

C. Emphasize the use of prescribed burns near WUI areas with the primary goal of reducing fuels to lessen the potential intensity, spread, and resistance to control of wildfires.

D. Give high priority to treatment of areas in high or very high fire hazard severity zones in SRA, and very high fire hazard severity zones of non-SRA..

E. Provide timely, accurate, and consistent information to the public on the purpose, presence, and status of prescribed burning.

F. Provide technical advisory services to private landowners, local governments and public agencies to assist in the execution of vegetation management projects.

G. Where appropriate, encourage joint projects with non-SRA agencies, *i.e.*, incorporated cities, irrigation districts, military reservations, counties, fire districts, etc.

H. Provide specialized equipment, management expertise, and fire crews to assist with prescribed burns.

I. Develop and distribute public information material to describe and encourage good vegetation management practices.

J. Work to achieve exemption from any imposed fees that are a deterrent to the program's objectives (*e.g.*, Air Pollution Control Districts).

K. Utilize prescriptions for burning that incorporate results from the latest fire behavior and effects modeling.

L. Develop a comprehensive vegetation management training program on prescribed burning including the following: fire behavior, fire effects, environmental concerns/impacts, assessment of fuel loading, use of specialized tools, development of prescribed burn plans, use of prescribed burning in conjunction with fire hazard reduction, wildlife habitat, watershed protection, reforestation, range and livestock management plans, team building, and contract preparation for CAL FIRE and other cooperators including private landowners.

M. Where appropriate, use the Department's contracting authority for private consultants, contractors, or agencies to do the project planning, preparation, and project execution in areas where there are more requests for prescribed burning operations than can be conducted directly by the Department in a single fiscal year (PRC 4480).

N. Encourage follow-up treatments after wildfires and/or initial prescribed burnings. Monitor and evaluate the effects of prescribed burning to more adequately evaluate the results of the project and to encourage re-burns to prevent recurring fuel build-up.

O. Establish project priorities as follows:

1. Assess the needs for vegetation management on a statewide basis with primary focus on fuel hazard reduction.

a. from this assessment prepare a 5-year action plan. This plan should indicate the degree of benefits to be derived.

b. establish the highest priorities for action based on benefits, costs, and risks by unit (for purposes of this policy, Contract Counties shall be considered units).

2. Prioritize and fund projects based on expected fuel reduction in high fire hazard areas, wildlife habitat improvements, and forest and range improvement.

P. Develop annual statewide program targets for acres burned that:

1. Consider past program performance and future plans.

2. Consider the difficulty of burns, benefits derived, and planning time in preparing for and executing a project.

3. Consider planning time for those projects that were planned and yet were unable to be burned because of external factors.

4. Relate acres targeted to vegetation need for hazard reduction and past unit performance in meeting targets.

5. Set target acres to be burned by categories of fire hazard reduction in high fire hazard areas, wildlife management, range improvement, or some similar categories or category mix by unit.

III. Commencing October 1990, the Director shall submit an annual October report to the Board of Forestry on the following:

A. Prior fiscal year's accomplishments including:

1. number of projects planned, prepared, completed, benefits derived and backlog by unit.

2. quality of burn, *i.e.*, hazard burn, wildlife habitat, forest or range improvement

3. performance against desired burn objectives (end result) and why any were not met (statewide, regional, and unit)

4. method(s) of treatment

5. environmental impacts/concerns

6. other burning permit activities

7. non-SRA cooperative burns.

B. Current fiscal year:

1. Program priorities for current year

2. Program needs for future years

3. Follow-up management of past and current year burns

C. A description of how the program has met the objectives described in I. and II. above of this policy statement.