

JOINT POLICY ON PRE, DURING, AND POST
FIRE ACTIVITIES AND WILDLIFE HABITAT

PREFIRE

I. INTRODUCTION

A. In California, fuel loads are very high. It is known that hot wildfires can do great damage to habitat. Prefire activities such as vegetation management activities, including both prescribed burning and mechanical approaches, are designed to reduce high fuel loads and in other ways reduce the risk of wildfire. Compared to the damage from uncontrolled wildfire, it is advantageous to use prescribed, more controlled, fires or mechanical methods whenever appropriate. In many places wildlife habitat is already badly fragmented. Accordingly, each unique plant community may have different fire cycles and respond according to appropriately timed prescribed burns. Hence, there are conditions under which prescribed fires may be more desirable and other conditions under which such fires may have undesirable effects on plant communities. Within this framework, evaluations should be based on available data, supplemented to the extent feasible with site-specific information and analysis developed within a time frame necessary to carry out vegetation management objectives.

B. Complex habitat interrelationships make prefire species-by-species analysis inefficient and costly. Project-by-project analysis is also expensive and inefficient given wildlife dependence on specific ecosystems that cover larger areas and themselves are spatially interrelated and often fragmented. Within this framework, evaluation of agency prefire programs should be made at the largest geographical scale possible to deal with ecosystem and wildlife interrelationships while taking into account sensitive habitats and species.

C. The fundamental problem complicating effective fire protection in California is the existing and rapidly growing linear distance of the developed/wildland interface within a fire prone ecosystem. This represents a logistical challenge for state and local fire agencies and is also an issue in managing wildland ecosystems to be self-sustaining. Consequently, it is critical that fire protection, including fire prevention, requirements be addressed at the earliest stage feasible in both development planning and in the design and maintenance of wildlife reserves. This should be done through the local community planning process with multidisciplinary representation.

D. Vegetation clearance near residences reduces damage to habitat from fires which originate near the residence. It also provides a defensible space from which to protect residences from wildfires burning from adjacent wildland areas. Hence Public Resources Code Section 4291 requires clearance of up to 100 feet around homes and fire safe regulations emphasize the use of fuel breaks. However, clearance may damage small portions of habitat, such as fragile areas like riparian zones, nesting sites, and rare plant populations. Provision for clearance should be made as part of subdivision or reserve design consistent with the state laws and local ordinances. For existing homes, clearance may be an essential part of a fire safe strategy and must be completed, giving care to avoiding, reducing, or mitigating adverse impacts on sensitive plant and wildlife communities.

E. Fire breaks, and to a lesser extent fuel breaks, may exacerbate the fragmentation Of sensitive habitat, depending on the location, size, and number of breaks, as well as the method of clearance (ie. discing, mowing, blading, etc.).

II. JOINT POLICY FROM BOARD AND COMMISSION TO THEIR RESPECTIVE DEPARTMENTS

A. The Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) has established a working group and policy task force to review the current vegetation management program; the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) is participating. This review should be completed by late summer and a report should be submitted to the Board and Commission. Until CDF and DFG report to the Board and Commission, the Departments shall follow the Board's existing Vegetation Management Policy.

B. Consistent with this policy, for 1994 and 1995 the Department shall complete as many vegetation management activities as possible on the urban interface, especially in Southern California. CDF and DFG should facilitate such projects on the highest priority. The Departments shall coordinate existing data and surveys, consult as appropriate with federal wildlife agencies, and assign additional staff as needed to facilitate completion of this task. To the extent feasible given staff, funds, fire season dates, and programs time frames, the Departments should seek to obtain additional biological data needed to fill information gaps; however, this charge should not delay implementation of an aggressive vegetation management program.

C. For 1996 and beyond, the Departments shall develop or update a joint (CDF, DFG, and other agencies) five year vegetation management program that delineates proposed activities for this time frame consistent with the goals in the Board of Forestry Fire Plan. This process shall: 1) encourage early consultation between fire management agencies and other wildlife agencies; 2) identify all areas that may be candidates for prescribed fire or other prefire activities; and 3) assess the resources at stake and the anticipated effect of prefire activities.

D. The Departments shall aggressively seek to incorporate fire protection requirements for both development and wildlife reserve planning. The Departments should coordinate such efforts and seek to have fire protection issues addressed at the earliest planning stage possible, including integrated planning for management of wildlife habitat and defensible space.

E. Consistent with their statutory mandates, the Departments shall support enforcement of clearance laws and recognize that property owners are legally required to provide clearance around structures as specified in Section 4291 of the Public Resources Code; and that communities in high fire hazard areas need to have an aggressive fire safe program, including clearance and fuel breaks around existing structures. The Departments shall aggressively seek to involve the private sector in assuming greater responsibility for fire prevention.

III. POLICY FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME

A. Prior to the start of fire season, DFG shall meet with and keep CDF informed at the regional levels regarding the location of important plant and animal communities and their related ecosystems. To the extent that resources permit, the Department shall provide

information regarding the location of the plant and animal communities and related ecosystems. The Department shall report to the Commission at its May meeting on the outcome of the sessions, including any issues that could not be resolved.

IV. POLICY FROM THE BOARD TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY AND FIRE PROTECTION

A. Prior to the start of fire season, CDF shall meet with DFG at the regional level and keep them informed of the status of the upcoming fire season, the location of areas where fire hazards are especially great, the availability of fire fighting personnel, and other relevant factors. To the extent feasible, CDF shall incorporate the information into the dispatch and Incident Command System planning information bases and make certain that field personnel are familiar with this information and its application to suppression activities. The Department shall report to the Board at its May meeting on the outcome of the sessions, including any issues that could not be resolved.

DURING FIRE

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Some ecosystems are very fragile to intense fires, such as a backfire at the wrong period of the year, or to mechanical disturbance which may increase erosional events or irreparably damage the habitat integrity. The greatest ability to be sensitive to habitat impacts is in presuppression activities. After a fire starts and increases in size and intensity, options usually decrease. After a fire is contained, options may again increase.

II. JOINT POLICY OF THE BOARD AND COMMISSION TO THEIR RESPECTIVE DEPARTMENTS

A. When there is a conflict between protecting human life and other values, human life should receive top priority. Protection of property, habitat of sensitive, threatened, and endangered species, timber, and watershed values should receive careful consideration in choice of suppression tactics from an integrated value at risk approach consistent with the Board's Fire Plan. The Departments shall work together to facilitate this direction and shall report annually to the Board and Commission on operation of this policy.

B. The Departments shall jointly evaluate during fire activities and report to the Board and Commission at their January meetings.

III. POLICY FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENTS OF FISH AND GAME

A. As part of the Incident Command System (ICS), the Department shall make available a local plant, wildlife, and fisheries specialist during large fires or on burns that threaten important wildlife or plant communities to provide advice.

B. The Department shall train appropriate field personnel in use of the Incident Command System and periodically renew this training.

C. The Department shall work with CDF to identify fire suppression tactics on wildfires that could have long term effects on ecosystems at the regional or local level.

IV. POLICY FROM THE BOARD TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY AND FIRE PROTECTION

A. On fires that have the potential to become major fires, CDF's ICS structure shall involve DFG and others as technical specialists to advise the planning section regarding sensitive habitat. In the event that DFG cannot provide appropriate specialists, CDF shall seek alternative specialists as necessary to deal with concerns related to plants, fish, and wildlife.

B. Sensitivity should be taken with fire suppression tactics in some ecosystems, where such activities could harm the longterm maintenance of the plant or animal communities. CDF incident commanders shall be aware of and consider the impacts of practices listed by DFG as having potential long term effects on ecosystems.

POST FIRE

I. INTRODUCTION

A. By law, revegetation efforts following wildfire focus on rehabilitating watershed lands to conserve water and soil and to prevent destructive floods. Historically, flood related erosional events have been a major issue. Recent studies suggest that seeding with rye grass may not be particularly effective in slowing erosion, at least in some sites and in some places in California. Seeding with native grasses from outside the local area of the burn has raised questions about contamination of local gene pools. Native grasses may also be more persistent than rye grass and prevent the recovery of the on-site vegetation species; these factors could be especially important in critical wildlife habitat areas. Emergency revegetation work may be necessary, but should be evaluated site-by-site. Cost of native grass seed is a significant factor to be examined. Mechanical and structural methods shall also be considered as they may be an effective and cost efficient way of dealing with erosion control and be less damaging to the ecosystem.

B. Under Sections 4675 and 4676 of the Public Resources Code the CDF is authorized to perform specified acts to protect the public interest, including activities related to watershed rehabilitation. Under the California Environmental Quality Act and various Fish and Game Code sections, DFG is charged with protection of fish and wildlife and related habitat, including viability of habitat following wildfire.

II. JOINT POLICY FROM THE BOARD AND COMMISSION TO THEIR RESPECTIVE DEPARTMENTS

A. Emergency watershed protection are those actions taken to assist in the recovery of the on-site vegetation and to protect downstream values of urban and wildland watersheds from excessive erosion and flooding following wildfire. These actions shall recognize the distinct differences between environmental impacts which are suppression-related and human-caused, and those which are wildfire-related and naturally occurring.

B. Program objectives shall be achieved by utilizing the Incident Command Systems (ICS) to obtain an evaluation of impacts to a watershed for fires occurring in areas of State Responsibility (SRA). This should be done in such a way to:

1. Keep damage to a minimum during mop-up;
2. Have emergency watershed work initiated during the active suppression stage of the fire and have work completed shortly thereafter but before the first heavy rainfall.

C. Emergency revegetation shall be limited to critical areas as defined by the Departments and should consider long term ecosystem health and processes.

D. Mechanical methods of erosion control shall be considered during the evaluation of emergency watershed work. When revegetation actions are determined to be the most appropriate for the site, efforts shall consider enhancing natural plant recovery and succession. In determining the most appropriate watershed treatment, the long-term protection of the environment shall be evaluated along with the costs and benefits.

E. CDF has established a working group and policy task force, including DFG staff, to review the current watershed rehabilitation program and all available related information. The study, among other things, shall specify appropriate limits to where reseeding can occur and how it should be carried out. The study should be completed prior to the end of the next fire season and reports made to the Board and the Commission.

F. The Departments shall evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts in attaining the intent of this policy and report to the Board and Commission at their May meeting.

III. POLICY FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME

A. The Department shall participate in the development of rehabilitation/watershed work response plans.

B. The Department shall report to the Commission annually on the implementation of this policy, including any areas of disagreement with CDF.

IV. POLICY FROM THE BOARD TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY AND FIRE PROTECTION

Until the Department completes its study, CDFs current policies shall apply.

The Department shall report annually to the Board on the implementation of this policy, including any areas of disagreement with DFG.

A. CDF staff shall advise DFG of rehabilitation efforts and request appropriate staff to participate.