**Local Government Commission**  
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**California examines practical solutions to climate-driven wildfires**

## Statewide forum provides practical strategies for dealing with wildfires, drought and the long-term economic, environmental and social impacts of climate change

SACRAMENTO – California has seen a lot of devastating wildfires recently, and for many people, “fire season” is seemingly never-ending. In fact, California has not gone a month without a wildfire since 2012. The intensity and severity of these fires have been exacerbated by climate impacts, including drought and heat waves.

The destructiveness of the latest series of California wildfires is unprecedented. This summer’s Mendocino Complex (River and Ranch) Fires have burned more than 378,000 acres, making it the largest wildfire in California history. Firefighters are also battling several other major fires throughout the state, including the sixth-largest Carr Fire that has burned more than 229,000 acres and destroyed over 1,000 homes.

This follows one of California’s worst fire seasons in 2017, which saw the October Bay Area fires and the Tubbs Fire, the state’s most destructive – with more than 5,600 structures destroyed.

**The third biennial California Adaptation Forum**, hosted by the [Local Government Commission](http://lgc.org) and the State of California, comes to Sacramento on August 27-29. More than 750 policymakers, community leaders and expert practitioners from across California will work through practical strategies for minimizing the severity of these wildfires and their impacts as part of a broader vision for strengthening our state’s environmental and economic resilience to climate change. The Forum is an affiliate event of the [Global Climate Action Summit](http://www.globalclimateactionsummit.org), an international convening to raise ambition for climate action.

“Persistent years of drought and another unprecedented wildfire season highlight the complex challenges we will face with increasing frequency in California,” said Kate Meis, executive director of the Local Government Commission, which organized the forum in partnership with the State of California. “With the stakes rising, the urgency for new, innovative and effective local responses grows every year.”

The Forum program will include a discussion of the latest climate research from [California’s Fourth Climate Change Assessment](http://www.climateassessment.ca.gov/). This state report, which will be released on the first day of the Forum, includes a study that found average area burned statewide would increase by 77% by the end of the century if greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise. With ongoing drought, an escalating tree-mortality crisis, longer periods of extreme heat, increased humidity and higher evaporation rates, massive wildfires are becoming our new norm.

New findings and projections in California’s new assessment build on a large body of research that emphasizes the need to address increasing wildfire risk. The average fire season has increased by 78 days over the last four decades and, in many parts of California, fire season is year-round. Global warming has been drying out forests so much that peak fire seasons across the West have expanded every year by an average of nine days since 2000, according to a study last year by researchers at Columbia University and the University of Idaho.

A 2016 study looked at fire occurrences in the Western United States over the last 40 years using climate modeling and concluded that almost half of burning over the past several decades can be attributed to climate change from anthropogenic sources (human-generated pollution).

How do we combat this in the years to come? The California Adaptation Forum will help state and community leaders chart a more comprehensive and integrated vision by exchanging knowledge about mitigating hazards and restoring our forests while ensuring that California is protecting its most vulnerable community members during these incidents and helping communities build back more resiliently in the aftermath.

“California is leading the nation in recognizing the impact of climate change and is taking action to build a more resilient forest landscape,” said Chief Ken Pimlott, who leads the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire). “We are investing greenhouse-gas reduction funds…into on-the-ground projects which will improve forest health and resiliency. The [Forest Carbon Plan](http://resources.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/California-Forest-Carbon-Plan-Final-Draft-for-Public-Release-May-2018.pdf) [final draft released in May 2018] will become the roadmap to reverse recent adverse trends and guide us in future investments.”

Covering more than 85 million acres, California wildlands offer a critical base of watersheds, wildlife habitat, recreation and economic resources throughout the state. In dry conditions, dead and dying plants provide even more fuel that creates hotter and more destructive fires. Soil erosion, flooding and mudslides can also occur after these fires burn off trees, brush and grasses that slow down runoff from rapid rainfall.

The dangers are more than environmental. More than 8 million Californians now own homes and businesses in these wildland areas. Loss of forest land and home construction on steep slopes and in wildland areas due to increased development pressures further aggravates the risks of short-term disasters and impacts local economies that are dependent upon a working landscape.

Wildfires aren’t a new threat, of course – they’ve been destroying cities for centuries. However, the way we’ve been building cities over the last few decades is making those fires far more destructive. More Americans are moving into what’s known as the wildland-urban interface (WUI), where suburbia butts up against wilderness areas.

Since the late 1970s, the number of Americans living in WUI lands has doubled, and 60% of new U.S. homes have been built on WUI lands since 1990. Not only are more structures threatened by wildfires, it is also costing cities (and state and federal governments) more to evacuate residents. The U.S. Forest Service now spends about half of its budget on firefighting, compared to only 13% in 1995.

“As we go forward, we need to significantly increase the use of prescribed fire to reduce fuel loading, protect public health and support ecological restoration,” Pimlott said. Climate-smart measures “can help California better adapt to drought and fire conditions and develop resiliency for the future.”

Local governments should consider the fire risk of allowing new housing in the wildland-urban interface and encourage construction in lower fire risk, dense city centers. We must also identify and address conflicts or barriers to fire adaptation in local land-use planning, building ordinances and building codes; incorporate fire-safe features into new development (such as building codes, landscaping and evacuation routes); and add specific restrictions when building in dangerous topography or conditions. Structures and landscaping should be designed, constructed, retrofitted and maintained in a manner that is ignition-resistant.

**On the agenda:** The [forum’s program](http://www.californiaadaptationforum.org/draft-program/) has integrated wildfire-climate issues into a dozen sessions and workshops throughout the event. The forum is made possible through generous contributions from [sponsors](http://www.californiaadaptationforum.org/forum-sponsors/) including the [Bay Area Air Quality Management District](http://www.baaqmd.gov/), [Edison International](https://www.edison.com/), [WSP](https://www.wsp.com/en-GL), and dozens of additional organizations leading climate change response efforts.

The plenary on “Building Blocks for an Uncertain Tomorrow: Policymaking in an Age of Climate Risk” will feature a discussion with local, regional and state policymakers about the growing tension between climate risks and other crises such as wildfire or affordable housing, coupled with the broader difficulty of balancing economic opportunity and environmental stewardship. The panelists, including Sonoma County Supervisor James Gore – whose communities were so significantly impacted last year - will examine political considerations, emerging solutions and lessons learned for responding effectively and nimbly to current crises while at the same time preparing for future risks.

“Sonoma County will recover from these devastating fires, but we cannot do it alone,” said Gore, who represents communities devastated by last October’s Tubbs Fire. “We invite community members…to come to the table and share your ideas about what actions will help lead to a successful recovery and resilient future.”

In the “(Re)building Wildfire Resilient Communities” session, the forum will explore case studies of communities impacted by the 2017 fire season to highlight how local governments are handling wildfire preparedness and response in a climate adaptation context that achieves both cost efficiency and equity in wildfire response and recovery.

In a session about “Frontline Communities under Fire,” the Forum will delve into lessons learned from the Thomas Fire, the second-largest wildfire in California history, about climate injustice, emergency management and building resilience for disadvantaged communities.

The state’s forests and watersheds are crucial for the water supply and water quality of the state, carbon sequestration, recreation, timber and other benefits. And yet, these resources are at risk to tree mortality and a changing climate, including increased wildfire frequency and severity, decreasing snowpack and drought. The “Water, Fire, Carbon, Habitat: Innovative Partnerships for Resilient Forested Watersheds” session will look at what it will take to reduce fire risk and restore these lands to a climate-resilient state.

In the “Infrastructure, Climate and Equity” session, the Forum will examine whether California’s critical infrastructure is ready for a future with more wildfires and other climate extremes such as droughts, floods and sea-level rise.

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