

Affordable Management for Non-Industrial Private Forest Owners

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Introduction

Assembly Member Jim Wood has proposed AB 362 that would use money provided by the California Forest Improvement Program (CFIP) to help non-industrial timberland owners that own between 20 to 5,000 acres to properly manage and restore their land. Under this bill, CFIP would provide up to 90 percent of the total cost, with the remainder issued as a loan to the landowner. The landowner is then required to follow through with the proposed management plan and repay the loan. [1] If the loan were not repaid by the landowner in the allotted time, then a lien would be placed on the landowner's property. Under this bill, CFIP would only pay for "eligible activities" which include management planning; site preparation; tree purchase and planting; timber stand improvement; fish and wildlife habitat improvement; and, land conservation practices. [2] Prior to the proposal of AB 362, private forest landowners would pay for 100 percent of management activities and be reimbursed later -- a process that many smaller private landowners could not afford.

Ecosystem

Non-industrial timberland owners and the management decisions they make can have profound consequences, especially since these small landowners make up such a large portion of the total forestland in the country. Family-owned forestland constitutes 42 percent of the total nation's forestland. [3] Because ecosystems do not follow property boundaries, management actions by private landowners will affect more than the scope of their own land. Forest ecosystem functions -- high quality drinking water [4], clean air, carbon sequestration, nutrient cycling, and wildlife habitat -- and ecosystem services -- timber, food, medicinal plants, and fuel -- depend upon good forest management practices across the whole landscape. This is especially true in regions where small private ownerships dominate the landscape where the cumulative effect of their decisions influence a wide range of ecosystem structures, functions and services. [5] These ecosystem functions and services must be protected as public trust resources under the Public Trust Doctrine. [6] AB 362 can ensure that small forest landowners have the financial means to protect public trust resources, as well as improve the overall health of the forest on their land and the surrounding properties.

Fire/Fuels Management

The lack of large-scale management plans leads to poor fuels management because of the various treatments from one parcel of land to another. Fires do not respect property boundaries, so without a cohesive plan for all of the non-industrial timberland owners, it becomes more difficult to properly manage for fuels and fire preparation. Reasons for lack of fuel management ranges from up-front costs to misperception of fire threat to property. These

reasons influence landowner attitudes towards implementing mitigation strategies. [7] If AB 362 passed, money could be less of an issue to mending these problems and assisting the State's efforts for better fuels management. Proper fuels management is especially important in California where there has been an increasing number of large, catastrophic fires due to years of fire suppression; increased fuel loads and stand densities; forest fragmentation; and, climate change contributing to higher average temperatures and longer fire seasons. [8]

Conclusion

Ecosystems and wildfires do not respect property boundaries so we need to direct our focus on managing forests in a cohesive manner that will be both profitable and conducive to improving the overall health. Financial constraints often contribute to poor land management decisions and/or lack of stand improvement, so it is in our best interests to give small landowners financial assistance. With the implementation of this bill, we can encourage non-industrial private forest landowners to improve forest management and contribute to the overall health of the forest and ecosystems across the entire landscape. If successful, AB 362 could contribute to higher quantities and/or qualities of clean water and air; fish and wildlife habitats; preservation of public trust resources; improved forest health; cohesive and cooperative management between landowners; and, reduced risk of large wildfires and more.

References

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