California Fire Prevention and Suppression Action Plan

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger
September 10, 2004

California Resources Agency

California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection

Governor's Office of Emergency Services

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My Fellow Californians,

Fire remains a powerful natural force throughout California. It is not a matter of "if" fires will occur; it is a matter of "when" and "where." It is therefore important for Californians to understand that living in California means learning to live with fire. Some of the qualities that Californians most enjoy – our warm, dry climate and beautiful natural landscapes – create one of the most severe wildfire conditions in the world. Added to this is the greater number of people moving into new communities that were once wildland areas – the foothills, grasslands and mountains of California. This movement of people into wildlands significantly increases the likelihood of fires that will threaten both life and property.

As the Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission (Commission) learned, mixing fire-prone wildlands and suburban areas makes it very difficult to protect human lives and property. The most effective strategy for minimizing the cost and devastation of wildfires is to take actions that keep unplanned fires from happening. I am aware that even the best public policies and strategies do not produce results unless they are followed by action. Thus, I am asking all Californians to increase their fire prevention and fire protection knowledge and to take action personally to minimize the risk of experiencing a catastrophic fire. I am also encouraging the California fire services – federal, state and local – to continue to learn from their collective experience and put that new knowledge to work using a holistic action plan for California's 100 million acres. Likewise, I'm calling upon local governments to recognize and incorporate appropriate fire safe planning in their land use and development decisions.

My Administration began immediately to address many of the issues identified by the Commission. For example, the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) and the Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES) are working with federal and local counterparts to ensure that programs and agreements for use of land and aerial assets are efficient and effective. CDF and OES are working to enhance the level of protection available for firefighting in the sensitive wildland/urban interface (WUI). CDF is providing staff and technical assistance to WUI communities to prepare plans pursuant to the Healthy Forest Restoration Act and is supporting the widespread adoption of the related model resolution sponsored by the California State Association of Counties (CSAC) and the League of Cities.

The attached report outlines the immediate actions which have either been accomplished or are underway to improve fire prevention and suppression efforts across California.

Sincerely,

Arnold Schwarzenegger

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Priority Actions Completed and Currently Underway

1. Increased Assistance for Fire Response – Executive Order S-9-04 was issued on May 7, 2004 to increase the assistance provided by the state for fire response in Southern California during the 2004 Fire Season. The Governor's order assigns four firefighters to CDF engines in Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego Counties; Provides additional resources in Los Angeles and Orange Counties based on fire threat conditions; Redeploys 10 refurbished fire engines to increase engine resources in San Bernardino, Riverside and San Diego Counties; Adds four CDF Conservation Camp fire crews in Southern California; and provides for an additional helicopter based in San Diego County.

2. Call to Local Governments – Governor Schwarzenegger sent a letter to the Chairmen of the Boards of Supervisors for Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego Counties calling upon them to work with him to encourage residents of their counties to be fire safe and to engage in tasks to protect their homes.

3. Removing Institutional Barriers – The California Biodiversity Council, co-chaired by Resources Secretary Mike Chrisman and Bureau of Land Management Director Mike Poole, met in Lake Arrowhead in June 2004 and launched a project to help lessen any institutional barriers to the speedy removal of bark beetle-killed trees in the Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego areas. Thousands of trees have been removed and CDF and OES are making these models and experience available to other areas.

4. Fuel Reduction Progress – Utilizing federal, state and local resources, more than 86,000 dead and dying trees have been removed from over 663,000 acres in the Southern California areas most heavily impacted by the drought and the bark beetle infestation. Forest areas at risk to impacts from insects, disease and other factors have been mapped and evaluated. Evacuation routes and centers, and critical infrastructure have been treated to maximize public safety. CDF has provided education and enforcement of the California Forest Practice Rules, targeting tree service contractors and licensed timber operators from all over the United States who have worked in the area during the past 10 months.

5. Restoration of U.S. Forest Service Air Tankers – CDF and the U.S. Forest Service have worked together to adjust to the loss of U.S. Forest Service Air Tankers. The U.S. Forest Service has authorized nine of the air tankers for service again and has entered into contracts with private companies with helicopters capable of fire fighting to fill the remaining void.

6. Extended Flight Day – CDF has clarified its process relating to aircraft operational times and has implemented new policies. These policies provide for longer flight windows while still preserving pilot safety.

7. Improved Public Information – OES provided four training courses on crisis communication in 2004 to state and local public information officers; more courses are planned. OES is continuing its work with local governments to emphasize the importance of evacuation pre-planning and early warning systems. In addition, OES and CDF are working with local and federal counterparts to improve integration of public information functions at incidents.

8. Fuel Reduction in the Sierra Nevadas – The Legislature approved the Administration's proposal to provide CDF with $39 million from Proposition 40 funding to reduce hazardous fuel build up in the Sierra Nevada range over the next five years.

9. Restore Camp Crew Strength – Working with the Department of Corrections and the California Conservation Corps, CDF is maintaining its fire conservation crews at nearly full strength. Conservation crews at CDF camps provide a cost effective means to mitigate the effects of wildland fires through vegetation management and initial attack. Without a vigorous program to reduce decadent fuel buildups before a fire starts, the danger of major fire activity is dramatically increased.

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10. Facilitate Use of Military Resources – OES has been involved in discussions with CDF, the California National Guard (CNG), the U.S. Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, and the Department of Defense on the process for the use of federal resources and for accessing active duty and reserve military assets. Currently, OES is reviewing existing procedures for use of the CNG Modular Airborne Fire Fighting Systems (MAFFS) and helicopters to ensure that all avenues of access are identified and the numerous ways of accessing federal assets are also identified, clarified, and documented (FEMA, CNG, USFS, etc.). OES is documenting the thresholds that trigger the use of federal assets and the scope of use for equipment and personnel. CDF developed an ongoing training plan and has already provided training for U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps aircrews in aerial wildland fire fighting.

11. Strengthen Fire Safe Councils – As they become available, CDF and OES are providing more resources to create new Fire Safe Councils and to enhance the ability of existing councils to develop and implement mitigation plans. As part of this action, in the 2004-05 fiscal year:

    - CDF has directed $100,000 to assist in development of an integrated Community Wildfire Protection Plan for the Lake Tahoe Basin;

    - CDF will allocate $250,000 for new Community Wildfire Protection Plans that incorporate a watershed protection/fuel treatment project element or for modifications to existing fire plans to develop watershed protection/fuel treatment elements; and

    - CDF will deliver $1.2 million to local Fire Safe Councils for use on community fuel reduction projects in the Sierra Nevada.

12. Provide OES Equipment with New Technology – OES will continue efforts to ensure that its mutual aid deployed equipment has the capability to utilize newer technologies such as foams and gels. OES has already equipped 50 of the 110 fire engines and 12 water tenders in its local government fleet with this capability. Modifications to the remaining 72 engines and tenders will be completed over the next several months. OES is also sharing best practices on this technology with local governments. Financial constraints have made it improbable for the state to fund this effort on the local level.

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13. Vegetation Management Plan – CDF is updating its current Vegetation Management Plan (VMP) to include the treatment of all fuels on non-federally owned land and for all treatment types. In doing this, CDF is consulting with private, local, state and federal interests. Watershed values, life and property values, and high fire hazard areas are intermingled throughout the state, but are particularly concentrated in Southern California and the Sierra Nevada foothills. CDF has several programs that provide for the treatment of fuels to reduce fire hazard. Each of these programs operates under the CEQA process to obtain authority to be implemented within the VMP. CDF is looking to update the VMP's Programmatic Environmental Impact Report to expand CDF's ability to treat fuels on a broad variety of landscapes and ownerships with differing treatments. Lessons learned from this effort can be used in other state, local and federal programs as time and resources permit.

14. Improve Public Fire Prevention Education – CDF is preparing an analysis of the effectiveness of current public education programs for fire prevention.

15. Emerging Technologies – OES is modernizing its Operational Area Satellite Information System (OASIS) emergency communication system. OES is replacing the outdated equipment in OASIS with state-of-the art technology to increase statewide communication capability to allow for high-speed wireless data and voice exchange during emergencies.

16. Disposal of Biomass – CDF is providing $100,000 in the 2004-05 fiscal year to the California Biomass Collaborative to develop proposals, including legislation, to improve the ability to dispose of biomass related to fuel reduction.

17. Requests for Federal Action – The Administration will work with Congress and the President to Insure full funding of Title I of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA); secure fair and equitable distribution of HFRA Title I monies to California; secure continued funding under the National Fire Plan's Community Assistance Grant program to support operations of Fire Safe Councils; reduce the "match" requirements for federal hazard mitigation programs; and secure continued funding for training, fire equipment, apparatus, and safety gear.

18. Enhanced Aerial Fire Fighting – CDF, working through the California Fire Alliance (an advisory group including all levels of government) and the California Wildfire Working Group, is updating agreements for the employment of aerial assets used in the WUI. FIRESCOPE (Fire Fighting Resources of California Organized for Potential Emergencies) is working with local governments to develop a statewide strategy to increase local air resources capability.

19. Protective Gear and Communication Equipment – OES and CDF, with FIRESCOPE, are creating a survey for local governments to identify the status and the need for wildland personal protective gear, safety and communications equipment.

20. Use of MAFFS as a Model – CDF and OES are promoting the use of the MAFFS program as a model for other air assets. OES and CDF will continue ongoing efforts to assess emergency technologies that may be applied to other aerial firefighting systems.

21. Additional Fire Engines for Local Government Use – OES is developing recommendations on the need for additional fire engines to be used in California's WUI fire suppression efforts.

22. Expanding Model Training Agreements – CDF has developed effective model training agreements and is working to expand the use of those agreements with federal agencies.

23. Training Needs Assessment – OES and CDF, with FIRESCOPE, are preparing a training needs assessment coordinated through the State Board of Fire Services and will explore funding sources for state and local fire fighter training.

24. Training Exercises – CDF is preparing a needs assessment for training exercises with the California National Guard and military resources.

25. Local Government Reimbursements – CDF and OES are developing a statewide agreement covering the use of local governments by federal and state agencies to request, utilize, and reimburse local governments in a manner that does not conflict with California's master mutual aid system.

26. Structure Protection and Perimeter Control – CDF and OES are working with FIRESCOPE to reach consensus on defining responsibility for structure protection and perimeter control. They are also working to clarify the release of mutual aid resources back to their original jurisdictions.

27. Mutual Aid Agreements – CDF and OES will continue to update mutual aid and cooperative agreements with federal and local governments and assess associated needs and costs.

28. Emergency Medical Services Authority – OES is evaluating the Emergency Medical Services Authority's role in mutual aid including identifying obstacles and impacts to private ambulance companies.

29. Volunteer Programs – OES is working with CDF, FEMA, and the California Fire Alliance to educate local governments on the value of implementing volunteer programs in support of disaster prevention, recovery and rebuilding. OES will work with victim advocates and other relevant organizations to address issues facing victims and will explore the development of a disaster recovery model.

30. Technical Assistance – CDF will continue to provide staff and technical assistance to WUI communities to prepare new community wildfire protection plans.

31. National Fire Plan – Through FIRESCOPE, CDF and OES will continue working toward consensus and agreement among federal fire agencies on issues and inconsistencies in the National Fire Plan, Wildland Fire Policy, structure protection and the cost apportionment process.

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Priority Actions Subject to Funding Availability

1. Create Year-Round Firefighter Capacity in Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego Counties – Through the budget process, CDF will work toward a year-round operational capability in Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego Counties for wildland fire fighting. The continued increases in population in the WUI make it increasingly difficult to fight fires, especially in Southern California. During the past three years, funding for an extended fire season in this area has been authorized by gubernatorial executive order. Providing this coverage has likely saved millions of dollars in extra fire suppression costs to battle what likely would be much larger fires under normal funding and staffing situations. Fires are kept smaller and less destructive, which means significant cost savings to the state for fighting the fires and to residents for loss of life and property.

2. Replace Obsolete CDF Fire Engines – Through the budget process, CDF will work toward replacing its obsolete fire engines over a five-year period. CDF operates a total of 390 fire engines from 231 fire stations throughout the state. The current CDF fire engine fleet replacement budget has not significantly changed since 1982-83 due to limited General Fund resources and budget reductions and has therefore caused CDF to fall behind in its equipment replacement schedule.

3. Replace Outdated Helicopters – CDF operates 11 1960 vintage Bell UH-1 Hueys which have been converted for aerial fire fighting work by the state and are designated CDF “Super Huey” helicopters. Acquired as excess military aircraft, they were later specially modified to meet CDF’s mission and have served the department well. However, because of their age and the lack of spare parts, airframes and support mechanisms within the federal and civilian markets have become scarce. Thus, they are nearing the end of their useful service life.

4. Telecommunications and Fire Resource Management Plans – CDF and OES are developing comprehensive telecommunications and resource management plans that will provide for updated equipment, provide for common cross-jurisdictional use and allow tracking of all fire fighting assets and resources available for mutual aid. These plans will provide for a phasing-in of new systems and will provide for a statewide handheld radio deployment system strategically located for use by local cooperators until a longer term solution can be found to issues related to frequency and interoperability.

5. Plan for 4.0 Fire Engine Staffing – CDF will develop a proposal to provide for the appropriate expanded staffing for all CDF fire engines statewide. Current budget allocations allow CDF to staff each fire engine with a crew of three (3.0 staffing). As a general rule, fire engines are staffed for eight months out of the year on the

theory that the risk of fire starts in the winter months is very low. However, investing in additional staff and providing coverage over a longer period of time, facilitated by several executive orders, has proven its effectiveness in keeping fires smaller by allowing CDF fire engine companies to be more productive and efficient in pre-fire protection activities. The additional staffing also enhances fire fighter safety during emergency response operations.

6. Strengthen the California Fire Plan – Working with the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection, CDF will accelerate and enhance the California Fire Plan as a tool for statewide analysis of wildland fire safety and level-of-service needs. The goal of the California Fire Plan is to reduce the total costs and losses from wildland fire by protecting assets at risk through prefire management and increased initial attack success. At its core, the solution is to integrate competing objectives, streamline environmental review and increase the scale and scope of implementation.

7. Propose a Comprehensive Post Fire Assessment Team – CDF will prepare a proposal for a Post Fire Assessment Team for major wildland fires. The expectation is that this team will prepare a report for each of these events that outline what pre-fire efforts conducted under the California Fire Plan were effective in reducing damage to property and resources, as well as those efforts that were not effective. The scope of these reports would include land use patterns, infrastructure, fuels management, building standards, fire prevention engineering, and suppression tactics and strategy. The reports would be provided to each private, local, state, and federal organization that may be able to contribute to increased pre fire effectiveness.

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