



Long-term Drought: Expert Panel on Wildfire and Forest Management

Introduction

Water Resilience Portfolio Action 26.3 tasks the State with developing strategies to protect communities and fish and wildlife in the event of drought lasting at least six years. As part of its exploration of Action 26.3, the California Water Commission will host a panel of experts who will address how forest management can help abate wildfires, which is one of the growing impacts of drought affecting communities and species.

Dr. Roger Bales, Professor of Engineering at University of California, Merced, will discuss the relationship between drought and wildfire, and how forest management can help abate wildfire as well as offer other benefits. Destructive wildfire is a noticeable impact of dry conditions in our mountain forests. Fire suppression continues to be a primary forest-management action to protect communities, other built infrastructure, and natural resources. Increasingly, however, fuels treatment by mechanical thinning or prescribed fire is recognized as a multi-benefit measure aimed at transitioning from a destructive to a beneficial wildfire regime and returning more-sustainable conditions to these forests. Sustainability can be measured by forest resilience, benefits provided to people, and equity and justice outcomes. Thinning often involves removing dense growths of small trees, resulting in less water use by the forest and more potential runoff as an important co-benefit. Drought-driven tree mortality in 2015, and again in 2022 represent dry-period responses to lower precipitation. When overstocked forests are thinned, lower tree densities improve drought resilience. It is important to note that a fuels treatment is not a one-time event, but a recurring need as vegetation regrows. Advancing the pace and scale of forest restoration through fuels treatment requires more capacity and financing than have historically been available to federal and state land managers or private landowners. This need is being met by partnerships involving beneficiaries working with land managers to restore forests, providing a wide array of benefits to rural communities and the public as well as to water-rights holders.

Dr. JoAnna Lessard, Watershed Resilience Program Manager at the Yuba Water Agency, will share her experiences in the Yuba watershed, discussing why forest management is part of their approach, and sharing thoughts on forest management as a strategy for mitigating drought impacts. Yuba Water Agency started its Watershed Resilience Program in 2018 to develop collaborative projects to increase the pace and scale of needed forest health and fire risk reduction efforts in Yuba County and its upper watersheds. Since its inception, Yuba Water has committed over \$10 million in funding across nine projects that are addressing forest resilience to safeguard water supply, protect local communities, and restore forests. Yuba Water is collaborating with over 19 partner organizations who have supported broad project development and planning and have developed innovative funding mechanisms to leverage over \$130 million in new funding for these projects. The North Yuba Forest Partnership is its flagship effort, formalized with an MOU in 2018 with nine partner entities, to work to restore the entire 275,000 acre North Yuba River watershed.

Honorable Ron W. Goode, Tribal Chairman of the North Fork Mono Tribe, will discuss impacts of drought on Tribal culture and how traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) can be applied to forest management. Drought and climate effects are serious business for the south-central California region's tribal stakeholders. A new predominance of fire is one consequence. These fires, once minimized by cultural

burning and other traditional land management practices, ripped through homes and destroyed homeland resources many rely on. The application of TEK can help mitigate some drought impacts. Mr. Goode and his tribal-ecological team have been conducting cultural burns with Sequoia Park, Bass Lake Ranger District - Sierra National Forest, Cold Springs Rancheria, and on private and Tribal Lands in Mariposa with the Mariposa Miwok Tribe. Meadow restoration practices using TEK and generational cultural practices including cultural burning by the local Central California Tribes has brought back stability to local resources.

Background

On July 28, 2020, the California Natural Resources Agency, California Environmental Protection Agency, and the California Department of Food and Agriculture issued the final [Water Resilience Portfolio](#) (portfolio) in response to Governor Newsom's Executive Order N-10-19, which calls for a "set of actions to meet California water needs through the 21st century." The portfolio outlines a broad suite of actions designed to move the state toward water resilience. The portfolio includes Action 26.3: Develop strategies to protect communities and fish and wildlife in the event of drought lasting at least six years. Action 26.3 is assigned to the California Natural Resources Agency and the California Environmental Protection Agency; the State Water Resources Control Board, Department of Water Resources, Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Department of Food and Agriculture represent these agencies. Action 26.3 is embedded in a section of the portfolio that is focused on preparation for a changing climate, which includes actions designed to help regions prepare for inevitable drought.

In a letter dated December 14, 2021, the Secretaries for Natural Resources, Environmental Protection, and Food and Agriculture requested the Commission assist with this action by educating itself about potential long-term strategies for managing sustained drought and delivering a proposed set of investments and policies that would better position the state to manage severely constrained water supplies for at least six consecutive years. The Commission proposes to accomplish this work by leading a thorough and inclusive public dialog, similar to the Commission's recent efforts to assess a state role in financing climate-resilient conveyance and in supporting locally driven, in-basin groundwater trading programs that protect natural resources, small- and medium-sized farms, and disadvantaged communities. The Commission has coordinated with other agencies and developed a [framework](#) to advance its work without disrupting immediate drought response efforts. At the end of this process, the Commission will produce a paper that describes a set of strategies to protect communities and fish and wildlife in the event of long-term drought that agency policy makers can draw on when considering future policy and financial investment.

The Commission's work on long-term drought will implement Goal One of the Strategic Plan, which calls on the Commission to "serve as a primary public forum for the discussion of improving water management policy to assist regions in achieving climate resiliency ... including those actions of the Water Resilience Portfolio assigned to the Commission."

Meeting Overview

Commissioners will hear from the panelists noted above, take questions from the public, and then engage in a discussion with the panelists. This is an informational item.

Contact

Laura Jensen
Assistant Executive Officer
California Water Commission
916-820-5897