How is California Working to Prevent Severe Wildfires?

May 14, 2026

Kyle Greenspan

Supported with funding from the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation

PPIC PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE OF CALIFORNIA

PPIC WATER POLICY CENTER

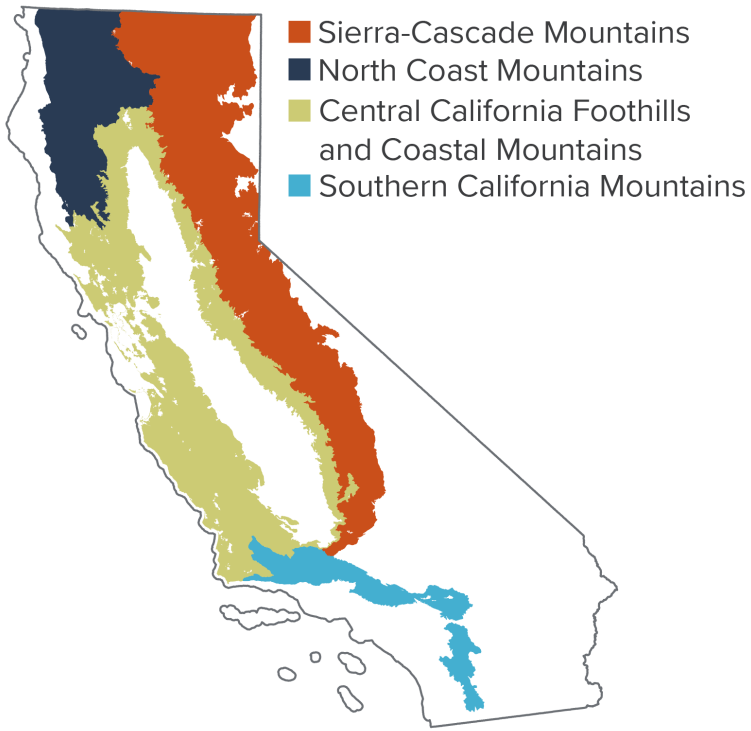
California is engaged in an unprecedented multi-agency effort to reduce severe wildfire risk

- The area of high-severity burns tripled over the past three decades in the Sierra-Cascades
- The state formed a task force to coordinate agencies and partners to prevent severe wildfire
- Efforts to reduce severe wildfire have been ramping up

All Californians benefit from our headwaters

- Headwaters are landscapes where rivers and streams begin
- Healthy headwaters provide numerous benefits
  - Water supply
  - Livelihoods
  - Recreation
  - Habitat
  - Carbon storage

Headwaters are crucial for the state's water supply

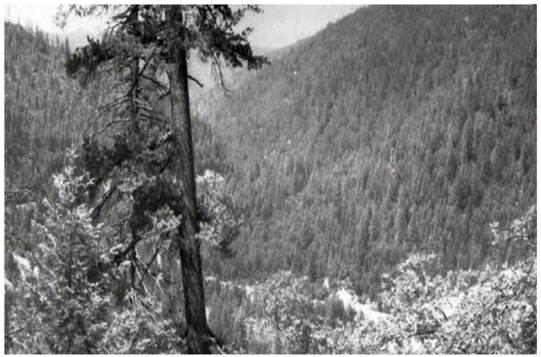


- Most of California's precipitation falls in headwaters as snow or rain
- Headwaters store and filter this water
- Sierra-Cascade, North Coast headwaters provide two-thirds of California's surface water
- Southern and Central California headwaters are locally important

Headwater forests have become increasingly unhealthy

- Historically, fires started by lightning and cultural burning by Tribes kept forests and woodlands healthy
- Overuse of fire suppression has made them dense and homogenous

Feather River
1890



Feather River
1993

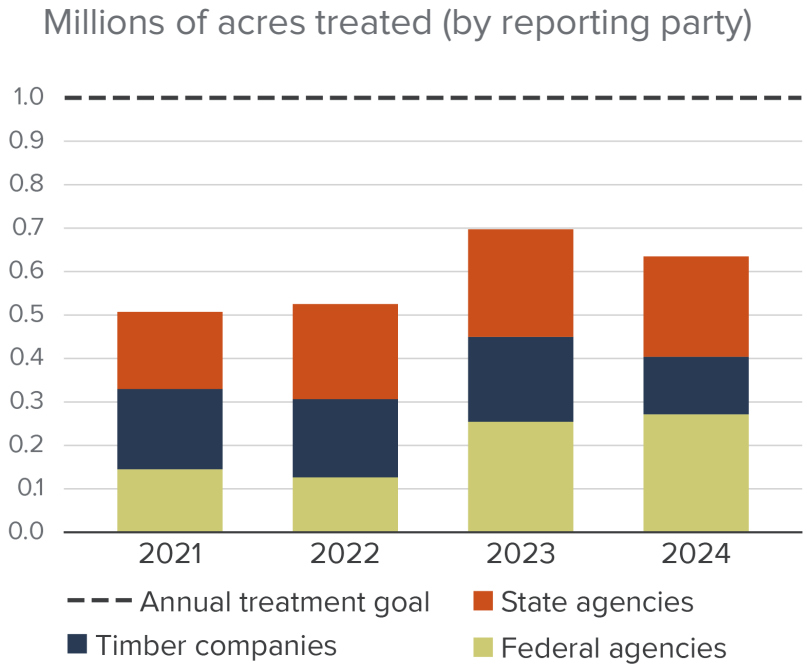
Photo credit: George E. Gruell. 2001. Fire in Sierra Nevada Forests: A Photographic Interpretation of Ecological Change Since 1849. Mountain Press.

Severe wildfire threatens California's water supply

- Severe wildfire increases erosion from hillsides into streams when it rains
- This increases water treatment and infrastructure maintenance costs
- This also leads to heightened risk of floods and mudslides

Photo credit: Placer County Water Agency

California is over halfway to meeting the million-acre goal and efforts are scaling up

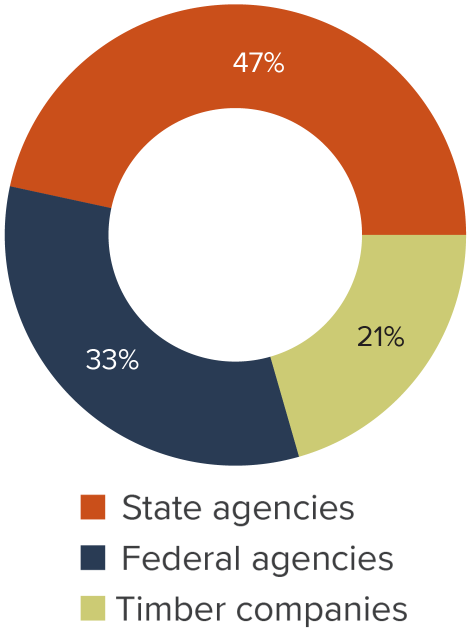


- Federal, state agencies each responsible for half of the goal, starting in 2025
- Task force aims to use beneficial fire on 400,000 acres per year
- Tree planting is important, but does not reduce hazard right away

State agencies lead a broad coalition of actors to reduce wildfire hazard

- State and federal agencies, timber companies report wildfire hazard reduction efforts
- The coalition is broader than just these groups
  - Tribes
  - NGOs
  - Municipalities
  - Individual landowners

Percent of 2021-24 treatment (by reporting party)



Methods to reduce wildfire hazard vary widely

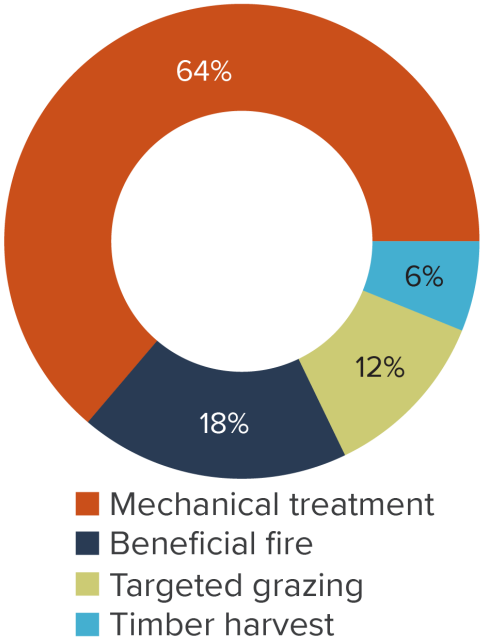


Photo credit: Michael De Lasaux

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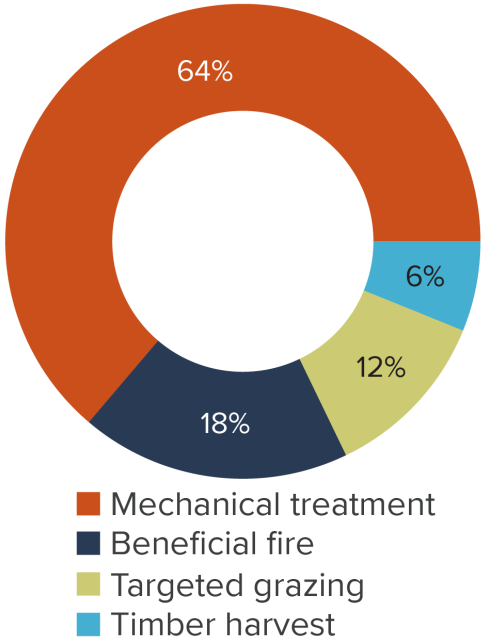

Photo credit: Michael De Lasaux

Impact longevity matters:

- ~40% of treatments are short-lived (two years or less)
- Combined treatment occurs on ~50,000 acres per year (8%)

Some refinements could help the state achieve its goals

On the data side…

- Share data on treatment longevity
- Require consistent reporting of treatment location
- Build reporting capacity for small and under-resourced partners

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On the policy side…

- Develop sustainable funding
- Revitalize biomass markets
- Bolster implementation capacity for small and under-resourced partners

Notes on the use of these slides

These slides were created to accompany a presentation. They do not include full documentation of sources, data samples, methods, and interpretations. To avoid misinterpretations, please contact:

Bradley Franklin (franklin@ppic.org)
Kyle Greenspan (greenspan@ppic.org)

Thank you for your interest in this work.