



FDAC

Fire Districts Association of California

October 26, 2016

The Honorable Pedro Nava, Chair
Little Hoover Commission
925 L Street, Suite 805
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Chair Nava and Commissioners:

On behalf of the Fire Districts Association of California (FDAC) and its member agencies, we want to thank you for the thoughtful dialogue taking place as the Little Hoover Commission reviews the 2000 report entitled “Special Districts: Relics of the Past or Resources for the Future.” At your earlier hearing the Commission listened to testimony highlighting numerous efforts undertaken by special districts since the report’s release to train special district leaders, increase transparency and improve outreach to constituents. It is our understanding that the second hearing is focused on climate change and its impact on local government services such as drinking water, wastewater, flood control and fire protection.

California fire protection districts date back to the 1920s. Many fire districts were formed from hose companies and civil defense teams armed with volunteers ready to provide local fire response services to their communities not covered by the county or incorporated cities. Currently, there are approximately 345 special districts that provide fire suppression, prevention, emergency medical services as well as all-hazard emergency response. Many districts utilize both professional career firefighters and volunteers to staff their stations and respond to the needs of their communities. Fire districts play a vital role in California’s world-class mutual aid system.

California’s Fire Service and Climate Change

The report “Flammable Planet: Wildfires and the Social Cost of Carbon” published in 2014 states, “The current scientific consensus is that wildfire risk will increase in many regions of the world as climate change leads to warmer temperatures, more frequent droughts, and changing precipitation patterns. Fires are expected to become more frequent and intense, and fire seasons are projected to last longer. Additionally, more areas are expected to face fire risk, and scientists expect an increase in fire sizes (in terms of area burned).” Furthermore, most noticeably in the Central Sierra Nevada Mountains and on the Central Coast, there is an unprecedented tree mortality rate and subsequent fire danger is being documented. Experts estimate over 29 million trees have been killed and another 58 million are under severe stress due to drought weakening and bark beetle infestation, causing increased vulnerability to major conflagration.

This year has been a brutal fire season already with 5,375 wildland fires being reported to date, including the largest wildfire in California history. Drought conditions are being experienced in 100 percent of California and are attributing to the severe fire seasons. One of the problems associated with this very large number is that it brings us to a long list of additional direct, indirect, and associated costs including damages to utilities and other facilities, timber and agricultural losses, evacuation aid to displaced residents, long-term rehabilitation costs to watersheds and other affected areas, post-fire flooding mitigation and damage, business revenue and property tax losses, public health impacts from smoke, and, in some cases, the tragic loss of human life. To address the new reality of California's destructive wildfires, the California Fire Service Task Force on Climate Impacts was established based on a recommendation by the Blue Ribbon Fire Commission. The task force is looking at essential collaborative response and evaluating contemporary research from around the globe.

All levels of California's fire service share a common mission and come together under the Master Mutual Aid System in this state to make a commitment to increased collaboration between local, state and federal agencies in the development of a comprehensive strategy to address the myriad of issues caused by climate challenges. Services are often simple expectations of the public, many times taken for granted until a conflagration breaks out.

FDAC encourages the Commission to articulate the comprehensive relationship and include the economic impact that devastating fires have on homes, buildings, wildlife, property value, tourism, air quality, erosion impacts to the environment, industry and recreation. Not only are dollars needed to be prepared but also to create and all-inclusive strategy to address the multifaceted threat at hand. Existing literature on past wildfires indicates that the total costs of fires are likely to be between 10 to 50 times greater than the suppression costs for those fires.

FDAC recommends that the Commission encourage:

1. Forest management practices which include reducing fuel loads, development of fuel breaks, public information on defensible space, enforcement of defensible space and land use planning.
2. Adequate capacity of fire suppression resources, adequate equipment and appropriate reimbursement for mutual aid response to limit local hardship.
3. Enhanced collaboration between local, state and federal agencies (National Emergency Management Association, CalFire, Cal OES, local agencies and the US Forest Service). These relationships must include adequate financial resources and reimbursements to all participants.
4. Local Agency Formation Commissions (LAFCOs) when undertaking Municipal Services Reviews (MSRs) or looking at reorganizations, considering any challenges or opportunities for public services that may be in place, moving forward due to climate change impacts.
5. Improved data collection and sharing of data. Good decisions do not come in a vacuum. Solutions are a modest commodity as the problem at hand is global. One suggested source of funding that may contribute to some of these solutions lives within the State Responsibility Areas (SRAs) Fee.

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The State of California is financially responsible for the prevention and suppression of wildfires on SRA lands which is just over 31 million acres across the entire State. In July 2011, the SRA Fire Prevention Fee was enacted by the passage of AB x1 29 to help pay for fire prevention activities across the State on lands designated as SRA. Currently, that fee is \$153.00 per habitable structure or \$118.00 if the structure is located within the boundaries of an organized fire agency. It is estimated that the total fees collected annually could be \$80 million and all of these revenues are provided to CalFire. SRA fees are a huge concern to local fire agencies as property owners remain unaware of what this new fee does or who is levying it which could impact support for new local fire service revenues. Although grants were part of the SRA program, few local agencies have benefitted from any new dollars. SRA fees were passed when California was faced with state budget challenges. Looking forward, it is critical to see if the policy intent of establishing SRA fees remains solid. Are the SRA fees accomplishing what was intended with the policy's passage? Or, would the elimination or a different distribution of those fees have a greater impact, which could positively affect fire prevention, suppression and mitigation of these destructive wildfires? With a better understanding of the challenges now faced, each dollar spent needs to be used wisely.

We commend the Commission's focus towards the impact of climate change on the various services provided by special districts. Districts are evaluating and responding to the effects of these climate challenges on their constituents, surrounding environment and infrastructure needs. California needs to be prepared versus playing catch-up as we continue to strive to keep our citizens safe and property protected from the potentially calamitous and unpredictable wildfires.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments.

Most sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Richard Pearce".

Chief Richard Pearce
President
Fire District Association of California