

Working to Address Wildfire Threats in El Dorado County



As our state continues to experience longer, hotter, and drier summers, the risk of wildfires increases and the need for preventative actions become more dire each year. Over the past ten years three large wildfires ravaged El Dorado County. The King Fire (68,370 acres), Caldor Fire (219,800 acres), and Mosquito Fire (76,788 acres) damaged critical infrastructure, destroyed thousands of structures, displaced residents living in rural, economically depressed communities, and created significant water and air quality concerns. In addition to enormous environmental challenges facing the region, residents and business owners have to navigate the complex web of wildfire recovery funding and deal with impacts to insurance policies.

Immediate fuels reduction and forest restoration projects needed to protect the region

A critical part of preventing future wildfires and mitigating any damage is ensuring that forests grow back healthy and critical transportation and water infrastructure is protected and maintained. Converting non-merchantable timber to biomass is an essential part of removing dead timber in El Dorado County. The Sierra Pacific Industries (SPI) former mill site in Camino has been identified as an ideal location for a commercial-scale bioenergy facility. Camino is strategically located along Highway 50 with easy access to forest feedstocks. The site is already zoned for industrial use and the proximity to forested lands will reduce transportation costs.

Need: Increase biomass infrastructure in El Dorado County to enable critical fuels reduction projects.

In 2022, the County of El Dorado established the Office of Wildfire Preparedness and Resilience (OWPR) to develop a community-based wildfire resiliency and vegetation management program on both public and private lands. This action recognizes that almost half of lands in El Dorado County are designated federal forest lands adjacent to rural farms and communities. Additionally, the county is developing a Community Wildfire Protection Plan as part of its overall wildfire strategy. Continued funding is needed to fully implement a comprehensive program to reduce fire risks in El Dorado County and protect residents and the environment.





Massive amount of unprocessed timber remains in the forest

According to the U.S. Forest Service, an estimated 36.3 million trees died in California in 2022, a significant increase from the 9.5 million trees that died the previous year. In 2022, in El Dorado County alone, there were 78,000 acres impacted resulting in 1,400,000 dead trees. The unprecedented amount of woody debris needs to be removed before it turns into hazardous forest fuels that ignite or feed another major forest fire.

An important part of the county's Wildfire Preparedness and Resilience Program involves finding sites to process the dead timber, slash, and other forest residuals. Currently, there are limited opportunities to process timber in California because the number of sawmills has declined over the years and supply far outpaces market availability especially after a wildfire. While there is some ability to export timber to other states, costs remain high. There are international ports in Northern California, but options to export unprocessed timber out of the country are very limited as assets on federal lands are prohibited from being exported internationally.

Need: Change federal policy (36 CFR) to enable a pilot project in El Dorado County to allow unprocessed timber to be exported internationally.

Damaged soil and vegetation changed the hydrologic patterns for floods which impacts water quality

Research shows that "large and frequent fires promote loss of biologically important soils and increase the likelihood of damaging flood and mass erosion events." Also, the extremely high temperatures of recent wildfires have changed the underlying soil structure that increases runoff volumes and reemerging vegetation species. In addition to immediate threats, increased runoff and erosion in the years following a fire can threaten natural resource sustainability.

Need: Establish a framework to assess and monitor the post-fire hydrological response in the American and Cosumnes Watersheds to better understand the increased flooding expected from fire devastation.

Forest regrowth must balance the amount, variety, and density of trees

After forests are destroyed by wildfire, the remaining trees and any secondary growth need to be evaluated to ensure there is the right mix of tree type, density, and canopy cover to increase fire resilience and enhance the seasonal duration of snowmelt. According to California's Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan: "Increased ecologically appropriate forest thinning and prescribed firewill reduce forest density, promote the growth of larger, more fire-resistant trees, and create a mosaic of forests that are less vulnerable to uncontrolled wildfire and climate change."

Need: Incorporate thinning into forest management and ensure regrowth efforts consider secondary growth and the variety and density of trees.



Proven fire-fighting tools need to be available

Recent efforts to limit the government's use of aerial fire retardant to combat wildfires are not only counterproductive but are very dangerous. Fire retardant is an essential firefighting tool that has saved lives, preserved structures, and reduced devastation from countless wildfires throughout the state. In addition, the widespread environmental and water quality damage from fires can often exceed the pollution from the aerial retardant.

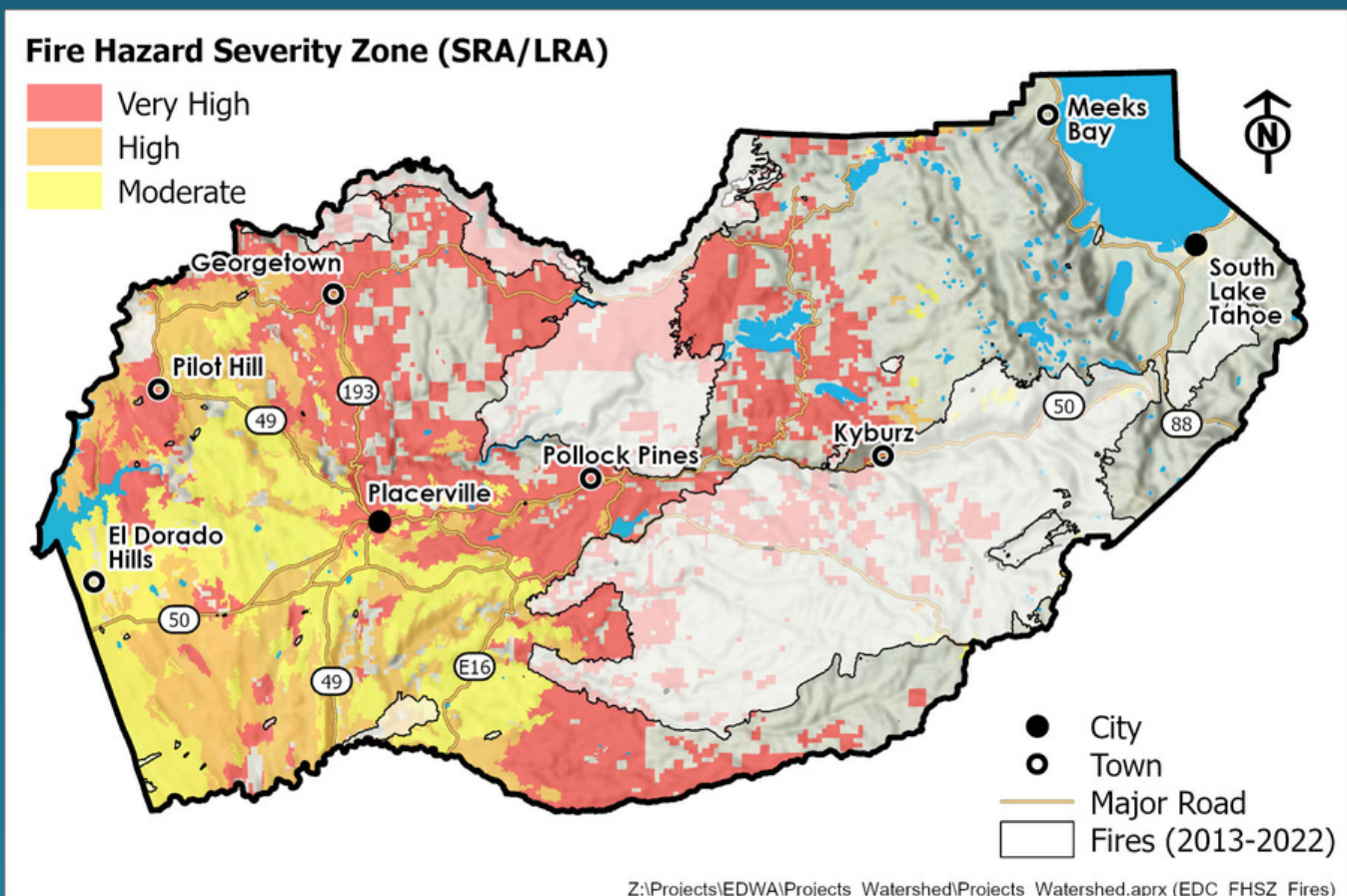
Need: Ensure that government agencies have access to essential fire-fighting tools such as fire retardant.

Infrastructure investments are needed to support wildfire suppression and prevent flooding

According to the El Dorado County Fire Safe Council, the county comprises more than 1,800 square miles with over half of the county's land within a national forest. Residential and commercial development increasingly occurs in wildland/urban interface areas that are traditionally considered high fire hazard risk. Numerous areas in El Dorado County have been identified by CAL FIRE as having only one way in and out. In order to ensure public safety, additional ingress and egress routes must be added. Roads and bridges need to be improved and maintained so that emergency responders can access the area and residents have safe evacuation routes. There also needs to be proper maintenance of vegetation along roadways and increased spacing between grass, shrubs, and trees that are planted in order to increase defensible space. Powerlines and critical water infrastructure should be protected and funding must be available to ensure communities have access to fire hydrants or other sources of water for fire fighting during emergencies.

Need: Invest in essential infrastructure repair projects and ensure funding is available to build and maintain infrastructure needed to protect communities in El Dorado County that are in high wildfire risk areas.

Creating a fire adapted and resilient El Dorado County is imperative considering fire hazard risks throughout the county and the increasing frequency and intensity of wildfires statewide





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