



Senator Dianne Feinstein Seeks to Make Federal Funding for
Fire Prevention Available Sooner
May 11, 2004

Washington, DC – *At a Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee today, U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) called on the U.S. Department of Agriculture to make federal funding to remove the dead and dying trees which threaten our forests available more quickly.*

This request came in light of the recent fires in Southern California, which consumed more than 20,000 acres of land, and the disclosure that much the funding slated for fuels reduction was not getting to the communities that need it most.

Last week, the U.S. Department of Agriculture agreed to waive the 25 percent local cost-share requirements under the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Emergency Watershed Protection Program. Additionally, the Department agreed to reduce the local cost-share requirements for U.S. Forest Service funding to remove hazardous fuels on private lands from 50 percent to 25 percent, which is the minimum permissible cost-share.

The following is the prepared text of Senator Feinstein's statement:

“Even though the calendar says it's only May, more than 20,000 acres already burned in Southern California last week – on top of 750,000 acres last fall.

Clearly we need to do everything possible to prepare for potentially catastrophic wildfires this summer. In our efforts to prepare, there is some good news and some areas of concern that I want to review:

First, I want to thank you, Mr. Rey, and Secretary Veneman for agreeing in the context of Southern California's emergency to waive the 25 percent local cost-share requirements under the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Emergency Watershed Protection Program.

There has been a logjam in getting to the ground \$120 million in this program's funding to remove dead trees from critical evacuation routes and from right around homes. Waiving the cost-share requirement is a major step forward, and I appreciate it.

I am concerned, however, that even with waiving the local cost-share only \$30 million of the \$120 million is projected to be spent this year.

We need to move more quickly. I understand that the Natural Resources Conservation Service is studying bottlenecks and may propose a streamlined process by the end of this week. I look forward to your feedback.

I also understand that in a partnership between the Forest Service, the California Energy Commission, and the Department of Energy Natural Renewable Energy Lab, three demonstration biomass-to-energy plants will be built by next year in Big Bear, in the town of Mount Shasta, and in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

This is welcome news. We need to build more biomass-to-energy plants, which reduce the costs of removing hazardous fuels by providing a use for the product, and help meet California's energy needs at the same time.

Finally, I am concerned that the Administration's budget proposes a 42% cut in funding for hazardous fuel reduction and fire management on State and private lands, from \$147 million in FY 2004 to \$85 million.

California's Fire Safe Councils, which help communities plan to protect themselves, have sent me a letter raising concerns about these funding cuts.

I have joined in a bipartisan letter with Senators Wyden, Craig and others seeking to increase funding for community plans to reduce hazardous fuels.

I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses."

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