



Senator Feinstein Urges Forest Service to Address Huge Shortfall In
Forest Fire Funding for Southern California
October 18, 2005

Washington, DC – U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) today urged the Forest Service to provide additional federal funding to meet the nearly \$40 million shortfall for Southern California’s four national forests – San Bernardino, Angeles, Cleveland and Los Padres Forests – to protect neighboring communities from the threat of catastrophic forest fires.

“The recent Thurman and Topanga wildfires remind us that catastrophic fires like those of October 2003 will return to Southern California’s four national forests,” Senator Feinstein said. **“There is no greater priority than protecting lives and homes, and no place in the country where as many lives and homes are at risk to forest fires as Southern California. I urge the Forest Service to provide the urgently needed funding to build effective buffers around our communities to save lives and thousands of homes.”**

The regional office of the Forest Service has determined that an annual funding level of \$46.4 million is needed to clear away the brush and dead and dying trees from these four forests to protect communities and escape routes for their residents. The Forest Service’s preliminary budget for Fiscal Year 2006 provides only \$7.5 million, or 16%, of the needed hazardous fuel reduction funding for these forests.

Senator Feinstein is calling on the Forest Service to increase the funding needed to remove the thousands of acres of dead and bark beetle-infested trees and overgrown chaparral in Southern California’s national forests. There are nearly 7 million Southern California residents living within an area considered at risk from the threat of catastrophic forest fires. An at-risk community is often defined as extending one-and-a-half miles from a forest boundary.

Following is the letter sent by Senator Feinstein to Mark Rey, Under Secretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and Environment:

October 17, 2005

The Honorable Mark Rey
Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment
Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Under Secretary Rey:

The recent Thurman and Topanga wildfires remind us that catastrophic fires like those of October 2003 will return to Southern California's four national forests: the San Bernardino, Angeles, Cleveland and Los Padres. The only question is whether we build effective buffers around our communities to save lives and thousands of homes. In response to my inquiry, the regional office of the Forest Service has determined that an annual funding level of \$46.4 million is needed for these four forests to clear away the brush and dead trees in order to protect communities and escape routes for their residents.

I am gravely concerned that the Forest Service's preliminary budget for Fiscal Year 2006 provides a mere 16% of the needed fuel reduction funding for these forests, \$7.5 million as compared to the \$46.4 million need. And it could have been even worse – if Congress had not earmarked \$5 million for fuels work at the San Bernardino National Forest, these forests would have received only \$2.5 million, or just 5% of the fuel reduction funds they need. In addition, there is no funding currently slated for the \$8 million needed next year for rehabilitation and restoration of burned areas on the four Southern California forests.

The sheer numbers of people at risk from catastrophic fire in Southern California are unparalleled anywhere else in the country. By one definition, the urban area at risk from forest fires extends one-and-a-half miles from the forest boundary. Fully 6.8 million people live within one-and-one-half miles of one of the Southern California forests, more than the population of 38 states. And on weekend days 115,000 people regularly visit the San Bernardino National Forest alone, more than can be readily evacuated. Another 187,000 people live on private land within the outer boundaries of the four Southern California forests, making them particularly susceptible to being trapped by fire.

Without effective buffers in place to protect all these people, the 2003 fires were catastrophic for Southern California: 24 people were killed, 3710 homes were destroyed, 750,043 acres burned, and the cost to Federal, State, and local entities so far has exceeded \$1.2 billion. We cannot let this happen again.

The Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission, which Governor Schwarzenegger convened in response to the October 2003 fires, has outlined what needs to be done:

“The most critical areas will continue to be the urban interface areas in and around the four southern forests. These communities have significant populations and limited means of egress. Concentrations of standing dead trees increase the potential for fire to spread rapidly. Evacuation and firefighting efforts in these communities are difficult and dangerous.... The protection of life and property from wildfire cannot simply rely on the availability of firefighting resources. Until the removal of thousands of acres of dead and bark beetle infestation to trees and sound Forest stewardship is achieved, southern California and other forested areas of the state will continue to have hazardous standing fuel just waiting to become the next conflagration.”

In the face of the need to protect all these people and their homes, I am concerned that the Forest Service has been steadily reducing California forests' share of the general National Forest System, Construction, and Hazardous Fuels accounts, from 15.6% in Fiscal Year 2003 to a proposed 13.8% in Fiscal Year 2006. The rationale is

that California no longer has the same volume of timber harvest as it did in the 1980's. But following the 2003 passage of the President's Healthy Forests Restoration Act, which I strongly supported, I understood the Forest Service to refocus its efforts on hazardous fuel reduction. Others besides the Forest Service have recognized the urgent need to reduce forest fuels: 60 local Fire Safe Councils work with homeowners in Southern California to thin brush on private property, and a single company, Southern California Edison, has spent \$162 million in the last two years clearing rights-of-way around its power lines in Southern California.

Even the current funding level for hazardous fuel reduction in California is in question. Of the \$46 million allocated for hazardous fuel reduction on California forests, \$6 million comes from excess Knutson-Vandenburg Act funds. I understand that the continued viability of this funding source depends on the Forest Service's administrative decision to keep allocating these monies from timber receipts. I urge the agency to use its discretion to provide urgently needed funding on the Southern California forests.

There is no greater hazardous fuel reduction priority than protecting lives and homes, and no place in the country where as many lives and homes are at risk as Southern California. I ask that you work with me to find the resources to get this job done.

Sincerely,

Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator

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