



April 20, 2021

Assemblymember Lorena Gonzalez, Chair
The Assembly Committee on Appropriations
State Capitol, Room 2114
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: AB 642 (FRIEDMAN) CULTURAL BURNING AND FIRE PREVENTION - SUPPORT

Dear Chair Gonzalez,

We are writing to notify you that our groups strongly support AB 642, which will protect Californians living in high fire hazard areas by making various changes to increase cultural burning, prescribed fire, and improve fire prevention.

Wildfires in California are continuing to increase in frequency and intensity, resulting in loss of life and damage to public health, property, infrastructure, and ecosystems. In 2020, wildfires burned more than 4.1 million acres. The August Complex Fire in northern California, the largest fire in California’s modern history, burned over one million acres. In total, wildfires caused 33 deaths and destroyed over 10,000 structures in 2020. The land area burned in 2020 more than doubled the previous record, roughly 1.8 million acres, which was set in 2018. Furthermore, seven of the state’s deadliest fires have occurred since 2017, with over 100 fatalities in 2017 and 2018.

On January 8, 2021, the Governor’s Forest Management Task Force (Task Force) released a comprehensive action plan to reduce wildfire risk for vulnerable communities, improve the health of forests and wildlands, and accelerate action to combat climate change. The Task Force’s action plan, among other things, called for expanding the use of prescribed fire and cultural burning. The Task Force’s action plan also called for the support of community wildfire risk reduction. AB 642 will assist in implementing portions of the Governor’s Forest Management Task Force action plan.

The recent Creek Fire, which burned over 300,000 acres provides an example of the effectiveness of prescribed burns. The Southern California Edison property in Shaver Lake, one of the impacted communities, experienced substantially less damage on and near the property than other parts of the county. The resiliency of this property is attributed to the prescribed burning program that the utility has carried out since the 1960s. This bill would increase the pace and scale prescribed fire and takes important steps to restoring cultural burning in California by improving prescribed fire training, permitting, and through the creation of a cultural burning liaison at the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE). This bill would also require partnerships and engagement with Native American tribes, tribal organizations, and cultural practitioners while respecting their tribal sovereignty.

Major fires have occurred in the high fire hazard zones in the LRA where fire safety building standards (Chapter 7A) are not required. An analysis by the Sacramento Bee showed that approximately 51% of the 350 single-family homes built after 2008 in the path of the Camp Fire were undamaged. By contrast, only 18% of the 12,100 homes built prior to 2008 escaped damage. Factors that can cause post 2008 homes to combust include not having adequate defensible space and proximity to neighboring non-fire hardened homes.

This bill would expand the number of new homes that comply with fire safety building standards, which will reduce the number of homes lost in wildfires. This bill will also require CAL FIRE to make recommendations on how Californian's can better understand their wildfire risk and what actions they can take to reduce that risk.

We believe California must take bold action to become more fire resilient and reduce the damage caused by high-severity wildfires. AB 642 will facilitate that action by embracing new ideas and ideas that have been in practice for a millennium. For these reasons we strongly support AB 642 and urge your favorable consideration of the measure.

Sincerely,

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cc: Members of the Assembly Committee on Appropriations