

Letter: Feinstein advocates for money for dead trees

Publisher's note: *The following letter was sent Sept. 7, 2016, from Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., to Tom Vilsack, secretary of the USDA.*

Dear Tom,

I ask that you reprogram \$38 million in previously-appropriated funding in order to execute 19 high-priority tree removal projects, for which environmental clearances have already been granted, that cover 38,000 acres of federal land in the three national forests most affected by California's tree mortality crisis.



Dianne
Feinstein

After five years of historic drought, which has led to the death of an estimated 66 million trees in California alone, my state and its people face a heightened and potentially catastrophic risk of wildfire this year and for years to come. California has already weathered several devastating wildfires this year, despite the fact that our traditional fire season has not yet even begun. Addressing the unprecedented tree mortality crisis in California is an urgent public safety issue that must be met with the most aggressive action possible.

The California Governor's Tree Mortality Task Force, which includes federal, state, local, and private interests, has identified 19 shovel-ready tree removal projects on federal lands that are simply awaiting the necessary federal funding. The projects are located on 38,000 acres of Tier 1 High Hazard Zones in the Stanislaus, Sierra, and Sequoia National Forests that present the most severe threats to human life. The 19 projects have already received all necessary environmental clearances, including NEPA. I have attached a July 15, 2016, letter to you from Chief Ken Pimlott of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection describing the 19 projects in greater detail.

I recognize that the Forest Service budget faces significant pressure from the current rules governing how Congress appropriates money for wildfire suppression, as you pointed out in your August 5, 2016 letter to me, and I want you to know that I am doing everything I can to get a budget fix passed. I have cosponsored the standalone legislation introduced by Senators Ron Wyden and Mike Crapo; I have joined with Senator Murkowski to include the budget fix in the Fiscal Year 2017 Senate Interior Appropriations bill; I have sent a letter to House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy urging him to move the budget fix through the House; and I have written letters urging the inclusion of the budget fix in the Energy bill conference report as well as in forestry reform legislation being drafted by the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

However, I want to remind you that Congress specifically appropriated an extra \$600 million for wildfire suppression above the 10-year average in last year's Omnibus and \$823 million more than your Fiscal Year 2016 Budget requested for wildfire suppression. Therefore, there should be no need for fire borrowing this year or for holding back funding for critical fire prevention activities like the 19 NEPA-ready projects mentioned above. These 19 projects are the top

priority for the State-Federal Tree Mortality Task Force, and I ask that you reprogram \$38 million in previously-appropriated funds in order to execute the projects as quickly as possible.

Sincerely,

Dianne Feinstein