

Regional Water Quality Control Board
North Coast Region

Executive Officer's Summary Report
Thursday, April 16, 2020

ITEM: 8

SUBJECT: *Forests, fuels, and fires.* Adapting to Executive Orders from the Governor's Office, new legislation, and evolving regulations in a rapidly changing climate. (*Jonathan Warmerdam*)

BOARD ACTION: This is an informational item, only. No action will be taken by the Regional Water Board.

BACKGROUND: The purpose of this informational item is to update the Regional Water Board regarding the California Government's recent legislative and regulatory responses to catastrophic wildfires. Staff will provide some background and context that led to the passage of Senate Bill 901- Wildfires (Dodd), the statewide actions that have ensued since its 2018 adoption, and the changes to the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board staffing and program implementation.

DISCUSSION: In recent years, California has experienced a significant increase in record setting catastrophic wildfires that have impacted portions of the state, including the North Coast Region. These wildfires have greatly affected many Californians through the loss of property and homes, impacts to local economies and environment, and the tragic loss of lives.

In response, on May 20, 2018, former Governor Jerry Brown issued an Executive Order on Forests (Executive Order B-52-18) requiring the state to double the forestland actively managed through vegetation thinning, controlled fires and reforestation from 250,000 acres to 500,000 acres. The Governor convened the California Forest Management Taskforce, which includes several working groups, working with regional Prioritization Groups, to achieve the directives laid out in the Governor's Executive Order.

In 2018, Senator Bill Dodd introduced new legislation to advance wildfire preparedness and response through Senate Bill 901 – Wildfires. SB-901 was developed to provide legislative backbone, regulatory changes, and dedicated funding to support Governor Brown's Executive Order. The legislation included: newly introduced fuels management exemptions, \$1 billion in funding over five years, new utility management requirements, and increased state regulatory oversight. SB-901 was approved by Governor Brown on September 21, 2018.

To provide additional regulatory oversight, SB-901 also provided the State and Regional Water Boards with new staff positions, including five new staff positions for the North Coast Water Board, which eventually led to a reorganization of the Nonpoint Source and Surface Water Protection Division. In addition to receiving five new full-time staff, the Division went through an organizational restructuring, has reprioritized a portion of its resources to focus on fuels management and utility corridor maintenance activities, and is conducting project-level monitoring of Forest Practice Rule exemptions and emergency notices with its partner agencies.

In February 2020, the State Water Board's Division of Water Quality initiated a process to develop a new Vegetation Management General Order that will include projects that are covered through the CalFire's recently adopted California Vegetation Treatment Program (CalVTP) and its associated Programmatic Environmental Impact Report (PEIR). The new Vegetation Management General Order is intended to compliment and/or cover utility corridor maintenance projects, and the State Water Board will be consulting with the regional water quality control boards during the order development process. The Division of Water Quality intends to develop the new Vegetation Management General Order and present it for approval by the State Water Board in August of 2020.

Since 2019, North Coast Water Board staff have been conducting inspections of fuels management projects, forest thinning activities, utility corridor maintenance, and post-fire salvage operations. Additionally, staff are working directly with other state agencies to support actions that increase the pace and scale of fuels management and community protection activities, while raising standards to ensure that water quality and the environment is being protected.

RECOMMENDATION: N/A

SUPPORTING

DOCUMENTS: Web address for Senate Bill 901 – Wildfires (Dodd)

http://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180SB901