

Op-Ed on Fire Season: California
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California Leads Nation's Efforts On "Wildland Urban Interface"

How many agencies and organizations does it take to implement the National Fire Plan?

In California, the answer is in the thousands. And yes, that's a very good thing.

Recently, I visited California and learned about the work of the California Fire Alliance, and especially one of its members, the California Fire Safe Council. The Alliance consists of the leaders of public and private sector agencies and organizations who have banded together to be proactive about fire management.

Arguably the state with the most sophisticated, integrated and effective firefighting effort anywhere, California is also a leader in the growth of the "wildland urban interface" – the zone where wildlands and private residential development converge.

That is why the new National Fire Plan is especially important to California. That plan sets out a comprehensive 10-year strategy for federal agencies to work in collaboration with states, tribes, and local communities to reduce the risks of wildland fire. The plan emphasizes the reduction of fuels in the urban wildland interface and provides community assistance funding for reducing fuels on private lands.

With a population of about 35 million and an annual increase of about 500,000 people, even California's more than 100 million acres of land are under strain to accommodate this growth. With over 44 percent of the state in federal ownership and another 5 percent in local and state government ownership, the stage is set for rapid growth of the wildland urban interface as residents seek out new, less congested, "natural" places to live and work. And this is not an interface with straight borders and easily defensible boundaries. Entire housing developments are tucked up canyons and hillsides, surrounded on three sides by wildlands.

The California Fire Alliance is making it easier for communities and residents affected by the wildland urban interface to reduce the risk of catastrophic loss from wildland fire. The governmental agencies involved, including my agency, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), are working together to provide user-friendly avenues for requesting and receiving assistance, including grant programs that aim to distribute funds quickly to the communities most at risk.

The BLM alone has funded 290 projects on private lands with grants totaling \$10.7 million over the first two years of implementing the National Fire Plan in California. Working under an innovative agreement with the state of California's Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and the California Fire Safe Council, the BLM has swiftly delivered these funds to on-the-ground projects. Grants have gone to local Fire Safe Councils (100 across the state), Rural Conservation and Development Districts, and watershed councils.

The results are starting to come in and the success stories are many. Assistance programs for senior citizens are providing help for clearing defensible space around homes whose residents cannot do it themselves, community planning efforts are setting the stage for fuels reduction projects, and community contact programs are educating residents and helping them take on the brush and undergrowth at their back door.

In the Bureau of Land Management today, we are placing greater faith and trust in the people who live on, work on, and love the land. We are promoting community-based conservation, citizen-centered stewardship, and partnership with all those who have a stake in the way our public lands are managed.

The results we are achieving under the National Fire Plan – through the California Fire Alliance and our many partners in California – tell us we are on the right course.

Note: BLM Director Clarke is responsible for the management of 264 million acres in the nation, more land than any other federal agency. In California, BLM is responsible for the management of approximately 15 million acres.