

Department of Fish and Game

Current Issues

Fall 2010

Wildfire Policy and Procedures

In 1993, and again in subsequent years, a series of extreme wildfires in Southern California destroyed considerable property and many human lives were lost. Assessment of the causes and impacts of the fire highlighted an emerging conflict between the role of wildlife habitat protection, and its potential impediment to fire prevention, response and clean-up. Fire buffers, green belts, easements and similar areas often serve as both fire breaks and as wildlife habitat or wildlife corridors, and vegetation management within these areas can reduce or eliminate wildlife habitat values.

Following these events, the Fish and Game Commission (FGC) and the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection (BOF) adopted a Joint Policy Pre-, During- and Post-Fire Response, which is a cooperative agreement between the two governing bodies, the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) and the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Calfire), as the solution to future concerns about wildlife conservation and wildfire response. Consequently, DFG adopted the Policies and Procedures for Pre-, During- and Post-Fire Response, and worked with Calfire at local, regional and statewide levels on fuel reduction, fire response and post-fire rehabilitation, all of which have substantial effects on wildlife and wildlife habitat. The collaboration stalled from 2001-2007, but following the major fire seasons in 2007-2009, DFG re-engaged in wildfire response through coordination with the Office of Emergency Services (now CalEMA) on post-fire evaluations only. At that time, the BOF considered restarting the joint policy.

In the years the agencies collaborated and reported regularly, the potentially conflicting issues between fire response and wildlife conservation were either effectively addressed, or enough progress was made that the public and elected officials were satisfied with outcomes. Field staff and supervisors in both agencies believed meaningful progress was made, and BOF and FGC were impressed and satisfied with the improvements. DFG also was involved with the California Fire Safe Council, a forum focused on protection of communities threatened by wildfire, and through this venue was able to create a better partnership locally and statewide for protection of life and property while also allowing for wildlife protection.

DFG continues to participate in interagency planning, coordinated by CalEMA, and will consider resuming collaboration under the joint policy. DFG stands prepared to support state efforts for assessing natural resource damages, guiding restoration efforts and providing post-fire technical support. However, fire response is not a funded activity and DFG relies upon reimbursements from responsible parties or emergency services for recovering costs.