**CBC Fuels Management Pilot Project**
**Upper Santa Ana River Watershed**

**Final Project Summary**
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## Background

At its Lake Arrowhead meeting on June 17, the CBC established an interagency team to improve the efficiency of planning and review of fuels management projects in a pilot area in the Upper Santa Ana River watershed. Participating agencies included San Bernardino County, California Association of Resource Conservation Districts, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, California Department of Fish and Game, Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board, California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Historic Preservation Officer), South Coast Air Pollution Control District, USDI Fish and Wildlife Service, USDI Bureau of Land Management, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, and USDA Forest Service. Three tasks were identified for this project:

1) Use ongoing project planning, including local fire-protection plans, to identify impediments to timely and effective fuels reduction work
2) Work together to improve efficiency of the current planning, review, and approval processes
3) Assist with the development of a program of fuels reduction work for the next 2-5 years

The interagency team met three times. On July 7, the team met to outline the program of work. They met again on July 20 to address Tasks 1 and 2. The team held its final meeting on August 19-20 to finish the project. The Team completed tasks 1 and 2. It also attempted to complete Task 3. Key lessons learned from this work are as follows:

1. **The participating agencies are already working together to streamline the planning, review, and regulatory processes.** They have made outstanding progress and there are few improvements that the CBC can make to this work.

2. **Many of the "impediments" that were envisioned at the start of the project were actually self-imposed requirements by the land-managing agencies.** Much of the additional survey work and reporting information was not being required by the regulatory agencies. Rather, land-managers often added this work because they thought that an overall cautious approach would reduce the time needed for project reviews and approval by regulatory agencies. Often, regulating agencies did not need that information.

3. **Using regulatory permits is the conventional way of providing environmental protection, but this model is a poor substitute for integrated agency planning.** Real streamlining of conservation planning and management is possible, but not with the resources that were devoted to this project. A new approach is needed to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of conservation planning over whole landscapes.

4. **There is considerable local interest in pursuing more integrated agency planning.** However, most local offices of participating agencies lack sufficient resources to undertake this labor-intensive work. Such an approach would require investment of specialized resources up front.

**Recommendations**

1. Each participating agency should provide dedicated staff to support a continuation of the pilot project for 2-3 months. The goal would be to complete Task 3 by first assembling an integrated GIS data base for all participating agencies. Next, the team would develop an integrated plan for the pilot area, using both GIS spatial coverages and the dynamic modeling tools of the "Fireshed Assessment" approach.

2. The Principals should also begin exploring similar work in the Sierra Nevada. The objective would be to complete one or two pilot projects that integrate multi-agency planning around fuels management. The broad goal would be to explore ways of accomplishing broad-scale fuels management in ways that also: a) efficiently and effectively provide environmental protection; and 2) reduce fuels in ways that avoid the catastrophic conditions that are being experienced in the San Bernardino Mountains and other areas of southern California Development of integrated data bases should be considered for the pilot projects. And management plans that integrate the desired conditions for participating agencies should also be completed. This work might be most efficiently done if it were merged with ongoing local community fire-protection planning efforts.

**Key findings**

The interagency planning team has identified the following finding to support the key lesson learned from this pilot project.

1. **There is limited opportunity to improve on the efficiency of ongoing review and regulatory practices.** The team evaluated existing review and consultation practices by regulatory agencies and found that the agencies are developing efficient ways to effectively protect the environment while moving forward aggressively with fuels reduction work on public and private land. These methods streamline the existing review and regulatory processes by: 1) avoiding sensitive areas where possible; 2) providing boiler-plate mitigations for routine work where impacts are unavoidable; 3) assembling and sharing contacts for all the potentially relevant agencies and 4) undergoing interagency consultation for

atypical situations. The team did identify a few ways for improving the efficiency of these processes. Important observations from this work include:

A. **The prevailing Governor's Proclamation has directed a process for improving state agency coordination that is very efficient.** This process states that: "to assist and encourage landowners to meet their responsibilities for removing dead, dying and diseased trees and clearing fuel breaks on their lands,..... the requirement for submitting notices to CDF .....prior to beginning timber operations for the removal of dead, dying and diseased trees or the cutting or removal of trees to create fuel breaks and the limitation on the removal of dead, dying, or diseased trees to ten percent of the average volume per acre are hereby suspended." However, this emergency proclamation will not stay in effect for ever and there is a need to develop broad agreement that the 'best management practices' (BMPs) being used are acceptable without detailed project by project environmental documentation.

B. **The Forest Service and others have avoided environmentally sensitive areas in order to get projects on the ground quickly.** As a result, no consistent bottlenecks and barriers to planning were identified with current project planning procedures on Forest Service land. However, some opportunities for improving forest health or reducing fuels have been foregone or deferred.

C. **The Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of Fish and Game, and State Historic Preservation Office have already been working together to identify ways of streamlining the review and regulatory process for fuels reduction work on sensitive national forest lands.** This work is leading to improved Best Management Practices (BMPs) or other pre-arranged methods that avoid sensitive areas where possible and provides appropriate mitigations where impacts occur. Some improvements are in place and others are under development. Specific projects include the following:

- The State Historic Preservation Office recently completed a new streamlined state-wide MOU with the Forest Service to address protection of cultural resources during fuels management work.
- The Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have been working to streamline the consultation and review processes associated with the federal Endangered Species Act.
- The Department of Fish and Game has provided methods for avoiding impacts to species under their authorities such as the southern rubber boa.

2. **There has been a tendency for planning agencies to experience a "culture of enhanced documentation" during project planning.** That is, agencies are increasingly adding survey requirements, additional analyses, and report text which likely exceeds that necessary for sound conservation planning. Most are doing this in anticipation of the information they believe the regulatory agencies and courts of law will require. The 'cost per project acre' and the planning time are increasing as a result. Participating regulatory agencies indicated that some of the documentation provided to them exceeds their expectations, adds to their workload, and may not increase the quality of insights into short and long term impacts of the projects. All agree there is considerable opportunity for improvement in this area. Better up-front interagency coordination should occur before project planning begins to identify mutually agreeable standards for reporting information, completing surveys, and other planning details that will reduce the work to that essential for agency reviews and coordination.

3. **With current staffing, regulatory agencies preferred to use the streamlined regulatory process to guide a 2-5 year fuels reduction program (Task 3).** During this project, participating regulatory agencies relied on their traditional, albeit streamlined, processes as measures for adequate environmental protection. Some regulatory agencies also have mandated programs (ex. TMDL plans of the regional water boards, species recovery plans of the FWS) that cover the same pilot planning area for fuels reduction planning. The team agrees that it is difficult to foresee how the various whole-landscape-level plans for participating agencies will fit together over a five or ten year planning horizon.

4. **All participating agencies see improved efficiencies for everyone through cooperating in shared GIS systems and integrated "fireshed" planning. This planning would merge the desired future conditions for air, water, plants, animals, cultural resources, and fire protection and public safety.**

   Shared GIS systems would avoid duplication of data compilation and organization efforts while allowing interagency critique and analysis of the pooled information. An important first step for this work would be to construct an integrated database to include the all the key planning and review information for each participating agency. Information that depicts the existing and desired future condition of the planning area for each participating agency would be critical components of the system.

   Based upon this information, the next step would be to complete an integrated plan for a pilot area that merges the current and long-term needs for all key resources. The new "Fireshed Assessment" process would allow planning teams to test alternative ways to merge desired future conditions for all participating agencies in the planning area. A presentation of the Fireshed Assessment and related concepts is available at http://ceres.ca.gov/biodiversity/fireshed.ppt .