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# fire to combat catastrophic blazes

**Kurtis Alexander**

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The Bobcat Fire burns through the Angeles National Forest in Los Angeles County last September. California Gov. Gavin Newsom's new budget proposal includes about \$1 billion in funds for fire prevention.

Photo: Kyle Grillot / AFP via Getty Images 2020

Following a record wildfire season in California, Gov. Gavin Newsom wants to invest an additional \$1 billion to make the state's forests and communities more resilient to future blazes.

In 2020, wildfires charred an unprecedented 4.2 million acres in California. Much of it was in overgrown forests and grasslands that hadn't been managed with the potential for fire in mind. The result, as in previous years, was fast-moving, highly destructive infernos, including the 67,000-acre Glass Fire that destroyed 1,500 buildings in Napa and Sonoma counties. The past fire season also included four of the five largest blazes in state history.

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State and federal land managers have long pledged to better prepare California's hills and valleys for wildfire, but little has been done. In fact, California has largely continued a century-old policy of suppressing fire, which increases the accumulation of combustible brush and trees. Newsom's budget plan seeks to at least start changing that.

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"This budget does represent somewhat of a paradigm shift," said Wade Crowfoot, secretary of the California Natural Resources Agency, who oversees many of the state agencies that

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prescribed burning. Newsom is asking that Cal Fire and other state departments draw up a burning plan this spring. Prescribed fires help clear wildlands so they don't burn as intensely when a natural or accidental fire erupts. However, because they put out irritating smoke and have a small chance of getting out of control, they can be tough to coordinate.

Boosting the number of prescribed burns is pivotal to meeting the state's goal of improving fire resiliency across 500,000 acres every year, beginning this year. The U.S. Forest Service has pledged to treat a similar amount of acreage.

The budget plan also calls for \$335 million to build at least 45 fuel breaks annually across the state for an undetermined number of years. The breaks, which involve removing dense stands of trees and underbrush, can slow the spread of a fire, giving firefighters time to get in place and contain the blaze. The work has long been a means of safeguarding cities and towns, but it can be expensive.

Another \$113 million, which includes matching federal funds, would go to hardening homes and infrastructure with stronger materials so they have a better chance of surviving a fire.

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Another \$39 million would go to a lidar remote sensing program and other research ventures to track forest health.

The proposed funding for forest resiliency would come from the state's cap-and-trade program, in which businesses that emit greenhouse gases pay for their pollution, and a one-time state budget surplus. Tax revenues are bouncing back more quickly from the coronavirus pandemic than state officials had planned.

The money for forest management is more than five times what the state is spending in the current fiscal year on resiliency. The new budget year begins July 1, though Newsom is asking that some of the funding be deployed sooner.

The governor's proposed \$227.2 billion budget must be approved by the state Legislature before taking effect.

Some fire experts and environmental groups expressed concern with Newsom's resiliency plan, particularly about working with the timber industry to restore forest health. They would rather see money spent not on clearing trees, but on home hardening, and want more funds for it. However, many praised Newsom's effort to improve wildland conditions as a good first step.

"When you compare the human and economic cost of fire suppression and recovery to the costs of proactive forest management that reduces the risk of catastrophic wildfire, there's no contest: Prevention is the smarter," said Sam Hodder, president and CEO of the San Francisco-based Save the Redwoods League. "We just need the political will to shift our thinking. ... I applaud the governor for launching that shift today."

The proposed budget also calls for a funding increase for firefighting. Cal Fire's annual spending would rise to \$2.9 billion under the plan, up nearly \$500 million over the current fiscal year.

The new money would pay for 30 hand crews to help fight fires and build fuel breaks, bringing the agency's total staffing to about 8,735 jobs. The boost in employees offsets the

purchase of new Black Hawk helicopters and air tankers.

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