



July 7, 2021

Assembly Committee on Natural Resources  
Legislative Office Building  
1020 N Street, Room 164  
California State Capitol  
Sacramento, CA

**Re: SB 456 Opposed**

Dear Assembly Member Rivas and Members of the Assembly Committee on Natural Resources,

We are writing to express **our opposition to SB 456 as currently written**. We strongly suggest the following three issues be resolved:

1. Task force composition must be more independent.
2. Chaparral and native shrubland must be protected.
3. Clearing a half million acres of habitat/year is not the answer to fire risk reduction.

**1. Task force composition**

It is critical that the task force mentioned in this bill include objective, independent participants who do not have a vested interest in planning habit clearance and logging operations, either financially or politically.

Nature must have a voice. At the present time, it does not.

The present language only suggests current government agency representatives and those who will be administering or engaging in habitat clearance or logging operations. The bill needs to specifically require the inclusion of members of the scientific and environmental communities including USGS, California Fire Science Consortium, Sierra Club, California Native Plant Society, Audubon Society, Center for Biological Diversity, and the California Chaparral Institute.

## 2. Chaparral and Native Shrubland Protections

The bill's current language states:

*(1)(H) A science-based review and recommendations to guide and inform state investments and regional strategies on actions needed to improve the health and fire resilience of chaparral, shrublands, and surrounding communities.*

**This statement is fundamentally flawed and is contrary to scientific knowledge.** In what appears to be a misapplication of forest fire ecology, this language appears to imply that chaparral needs “treatment” to remain healthy and resilient to fire.

Science has clearly shown that the best management strategy for chaparral that has not been compromised by too much fire, especially old-growth chaparral (50-years-old or more), is to leave it alone.

The legislature has already correctly recognized that chaparral and sage scrub is threatened by *too much fire* (PRC 4483). Therefore, this bill must recognize this fact by specifically limiting any actions/projects related to native shrublands in the following manner:

*“Consistent with the Action Plan’s differentiation of chaparral and shrublands from conifer forests in terms of appropriate management approaches and risk of type conversion, treatments in chaparral and shrublands shall consist solely of removal of flammable non-native, invasive species and restoration of native species in damaged or type-converted vegetation, defensible space of 100-ft around structures and/or communities, strategic fuel breaks within 1,000 feet of communities at risk, ignition control along roadways, and maintenance of fire roads that provide firefighting access to communities.”*

In addition, to clarify PRC 4483, “type conversion” of chaparral and sage scrub needs to be properly defined. Otherwise, agencies, specifically Cal Fire, are allowed to define type conversion in any manner they wish in pursuit of agency objectives. Cal Fire has already done this within their Vegetation Treatment Program (VTP) in a manner that is contrary to scientific definitions. Worse, Cal Fire has passed along the responsibility to determine if a clearance project will cause type conversion to local project proponents – a clear conflict of interest.

Therefore, we suggest the following language defining type conversion be included in this bill:

*Type conversion of chaparral is the process by which the shrub canopy is significantly reduced by single or multiple disturbance events leading to reduction or extirpation of the dominant shrub species.*

To further clarify the difference between management actions for native shrublands and forests, the phrase “ecological restoration” also needs to be properly defined:

*In native shrublands (chaparral and coastal sage scrub), ecological restoration consists of removal of flammable non-native, invasive species and restoration of native species in damaged or type-converted vegetation."*

### **3. Clearing a half million acres of habitat/year is environmentally destructive.**

Consistent with the Newsom administration’s push to address wildfire risk by clearing large amounts of habitat, the bills supports,

*(1)(A) A joint strategy to annually treat 500,000 acres of federal land and 500,000 acres of nonfederal land by 2025.*

This approach is an attempt to control Nature, thinking if we can just clear out enough habitat, log enough trees, or make our forests like artificial parks, large wildfires will no longer occur. This is a false assumption.

#### **We strongly urge this language be dropped from the bill.**

As you know, we sent a comprehensive letter to members of the committee on this subject on March 19, 2021. We urge you to revisit that letter which is available on our website here:

[https://www.californiachaparral.org/\\_static/0693aabab853e5b678ff613a5ac70a10/wildfire-budget\\_lives-and-homes-first.pdf?dl=1](https://www.californiachaparral.org/_static/0693aabab853e5b678ff613a5ac70a10/wildfire-budget_lives-and-homes-first.pdf?dl=1)

Here is what the science shows as detailed in our letter:

#### **a. Fire Resistant Communities Save Lives and Homes**

The most effective way to protect lives and homes from wildfire is to make homes themselves resistant to embers, the main cause of home ignition.\* This should be **the primary focus of the wildfire budget**. Contrary to statements by the Newsom administration, most of the money is going to logging forests, supporting the timber industry, and clearing habitat.

#### **b. Fire Suppression Not at Fault**

At least 63% of low elevation conifer forests have been either burned or logged since 1950. Therefore, most conifer forests suffer more from past logging abuses than from fire suppression. In fact, fire suppression has been helpful in protecting native shrublands, especially chaparral, from too much fire.

#### **c. Dead Trees Not at Fault**

California’s most devastating wildfires (defined as 500 or more homes lost and/or 1 or more fatalities) have had nothing to do with dead trees in forests. Furthermore, most communities at risk are not near forests at all.

**d. Wind and Embers at Fault**

The most devastating wildfires are wind-driven. Fuel breaks and other forms of habitat clearance consistently fail to protect communities from ignitions caused by wind-driven embers.

**e. Too Much Fire Threatens Habitats**

Native shrublands like chaparral and coastal sage scrub, habitats that support much of California's natural biodiversity, are threatened by too much fire rather than by too little.

We urge you to address wildfire risk in a comprehensive, scientific manner. The current approach advocated by the governor and Cal Fire does not.

Including the changes to SB 456 we have suggested above can help California create a wildfire risk reduction strategy that will protect both our communities and our fragile natural environment.

Sincerely,

Richard W. Halsey  
Director

\* A free, comprehensive guide for homeowners on how to protect their homes from wildfire, **From the House Outward**, is available here:  
<https://californiachaparral.org/fire/protecting-your-home/>