

BOARD OF FORESTRY AND FIRE PROTECTION

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 SACRAMENTO, CA 94244-2460
 Website: www.bof.fire.ca.gov
 (916) 653-8007



DATE

Re: Notice of Availability of a Draft Program Environmental Impact Report Regarding the Proposed Statewide Vegetation Treatment Program

To Interested Parties:

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the California Board of Forestry and Fire Protection (Board), as lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), is making available a draft program environmental impact report (PEIR) for public review. The Board has prepared this PEIR to provide the public, responsible agencies, and trustee agencies with information about the potential environmental effects of the proposed Vegetation Treatment Program (VTP). This PEIR was prepared in compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act of 1970 (as amended) and the State CEQA Guidelines (California Code of Regulations [CCR] title 14, section 15000 et seq). The Board hereby invites comments on the adequacy and completeness of the environmental analyses in the VTP PEIR.

PROGRAM LOCATION: The mission of the Board includes developing policies and programs that implement a fire protection system that protects the people of California. To accomplish this mission, the Board proposes the implementation of the Vegetation Treatment Program (VTP) to reduce the wildland fuel threat on State Responsibility Area (SRA) lands and restore economically and environmentally sustainable range landscapes.

The SRA is the land in California where the state has the financial responsibility for the prevention and suppression of wildfires (PRC §§ 4102, 4125). The SRA landscape consists of approximately 31 million acres across California that include lands covered wholly or in part by forests or are principally used for range or forage purposes (PRC § 4126). The VTP allows for the implementation of specific vegetation treatment projects at appropriate locations and scales in the SRA to meet the VTP's objectives for fire prevention, fire protection, and/or ecological restoration, which limits the proposed VTP to activities on approximately 22 million acres in the SRA (see Figure 1 at the end of this Notice). Vegetation treatment activities will be implemented primarily on privately owned land within the SRA, and only on a voluntary basis.

It is anticipated that treatments under the proposed VTP will take place on approximately 60,000 acres per year, less than 2% of the SRA landscape. Because this program depends on willing landowners, available funding, and available treatment days, it is expected that fewer acres than 60,000 will be treated per year and that the number of acres treated each year will vary. Those limiting factors also make it impossible to determine in advance exactly where in the state treatments will take place. However, this PEIR has extrapolated historical treatment data and other attributes to estimate treatment acres by bioregion (see Table 1). This Program Environmental Impact Report (Program EIR) analyzes the potential environmental impacts that may occur from undertaking the VTP at this scale, and identifies project level limitations and mitigation measures that will minimize any impacts.

Table 1. Approximate annual acres treated in each bioregion. See Chapter 2.

| Bioregion | Approximate Annual Acreage Treated |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Bay Area/Delta | 5,855 |
| Central Coast | 8,904 |
| Colorado Desert | 988 |
| Klamath/North Coast | 11,650 |
| Modoc | 7,175 |
| Mojave | 2,573 |
| Sacramento Valley | 2,364 |
| San Joaquin Valley | 1,877 |
| Sierra Nevada | 13,411 |
| South Coast | 5,204 |
| Total by Treatment | 60,000 |

PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW: A combination of manmade and natural factors has led to a situation where wildfire acreage, fire suppression cost, and losses of residential structures have increased dramatically in the past three decades. A problem of this magnitude goes beyond jurisdictional boundaries and requires a statewide strategy. An overarching goal of vegetation treatments is to alter fire behavior and reduce harmful effects. However, California displays astonishing diversity in plant, animal, and social systems and without proper design, the statewide planning and implementation of vegetation treatments can potentially come with significant costs. To this end, the VTP Program EIR lays out a framework for prioritizing, planning, implementing, and monitoring fuel treatments across the SRA.

To attain the objectives of the VTP at a state-wide scale, the VTP organizes treatments into three general types:

- Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI): treatments will be focused in WUI-designated areas, and generally consist of fuel reduction to prevent the spread of fire between wildlands and structures, or vice versa.
- Fuel Breaks: strategically placed vegetation treatments that actively support fire control activities.
- Ecological Restoration: projects will generally occur outside the WUI in areas that have departed from the natural fire regime as a result of fire exclusion. Ecological restoration treatments will focus on restoring ecosystem resiliency by moderating uncharacteristic wildland fuel conditions to reflect historic vegetative composition and structure, including cultural landscapes.

Allowable treatment activities under the VTP include prescribed fire, manual activities (i.e., hand crew work), mechanical activities, prescribed herbivory (targeted beneficial grazing), and targeted ground application of herbicides. These activities will be used singularly or in combination depending upon the treatment type (i.e., WUI, fuel break, or ecological restoration) and environmental considerations.

Similar projects are currently undertaken by the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) as part of the existing Vegetation Management Program (VMP), the Fire Prevention Program, and the California Forest Improvement Program (CFIP). Each of these statewide programs are ongoing and implemented through a separate CEQA process. The VTP is part of this comprehensive fire prevention strategy from the Board that is implemented by CAL FIRE. This program intends to lower the risk of damaging wildfires on nonfederal lands by managing vegetation to modify and/or reduce hazardous fuels. The key objectives of this program are to prevent loss of lives and property, reduce fire suppression costs, and protect natural resources from damaging wildfire through the use of appropriate vegetation treatments. It is important to acknowledge that the VTP is not meant to resolve all hazardous fuel conditions but rather provide a tool to address them on a voluntary basis for all stakeholders within and associated with the SRA.

This PEIR would govern project-scale decision making under the VTP and is intended to provide CEQA compliance for projects implemented under the VTP. CAL FIRE would use this PEIR in deciding whether to approve, approve with Project Specific Requirements, or deny proposed individual projects. This PEIR provides Standard Project Requirements and mitigation measures using the most current technology and scientific information to avoid significant environmental impacts. Use of the PEIR to facilitate CEQA compliance for these individual projects enables CAL FIRE to utilize a consistent implementation process, including public participation, to develop projects that best meet the objectives of the VTP while avoiding significant environmental impacts.

The below Table 2 summarizes the environmental impacts from the proposed VTP. With the application of Standard Project Requirements (SPRs) and mitigation measures, the proposed VTP demonstrates no significant environmental impacts. The environmental analysis is in Chapter 4 and the cumulative effects analysis is in Chapter 5.

(continued)

Table 2. Impact Summary Analysis and Reference Locations.

| Impact Summary Analysis and Reference Locations. | | | | | |
|---|--------|---|-----------------------|--------------------|--|
| Environmental Resource Area | Review | Reference Location | | | |
| | | Resource impacts determined to be Significant | Significance Criteria | Threshold Criteria | Mitigation and/or Standard Project Requirement |
| Biological Resources | | N | 4-98 | 4-99 | 4-139, 5-27, 5-29-31, 5-40-45, 5-80 |
| Geology, Hydrology, and Soils | | N | 4-187 | 4-187 | 4-203, 5-47, 5-50, 5-80 |
| Hazardous Materials | | N | 4-216 | 4-216 | 4-225, 5-42, 5-55 |
| Water Quality | | N | 4-252 | 4-252 | 4-203, 5-30, 5-42, 5-46, 5-54, 5-57, 5-80 |
| Archeological, Cultural and Historic Resources | | N | 4-281 | 4-282 | 4-294, 5-60 |
| Noise | | N | 4-297 | 4-298 | 4-304, 5-43, 5-62 |
| Recreation | | N | 4-307 | 4-308 | NM |
| Utilities and Energy | | N | 4-319 | 4-319 | NM |
| Transportation and Traffic | | N | 4-323 | 4-323 | 4-326, 5-71, 5-75 |
| Population, Employment, Housing, & Socio-economic Wellbeing | | N | 4-339 | 4-339 | NM |
| Air Quality | | N* | 4-362 | 4-363 | 4-379, 5-75 |
| Aesthetics and Visual Resources | | N | 4-384 | 4-385 | NM |
| Climate Change | | N | 4-401 | 4-402 | 4-413, 5-80 |
| * - No significance after mitigation is applied NM - No mitigations were needed. | | | | | |

DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY: The VTP PEIR are available for download from the Board's website: http://bofdata.fire.ca.gov/board_committees/resource_protection_committee/current_projects/vegetation_treatment_program_environmental_impact_report_vtpeir/

Hard copies of the document can be reviewed at the Board's office in Sacramento (address below). To arrange to view documents at Board offices during business hours, call (916) 653-2928. The document can also be reviewed electronically at libraries throughout the state that serve as document repositories; for a full list of locations, refer to the VTP website. CDs are available on request by phoning (916) 653-2928 or emailing VegetationTreatment@bof.ca.gov. Copies will also be available at any regularly scheduled Board meeting where the VTP PEIR is on the noticed agenda **and at the VTP PEIR public meetings on/in XX**. Printed copies are also available at cost plus postage, upon request using the above contact information.

PUBLIC REVIEW PERIOD: The PEIR is available for a **XX-day public review and comment period**, which begins XX and ends at 5pm on XX. **Please send comments on the PEIR at the earliest possible date, but postmarked no later than 5pm on XX in order for your comments to be considered.**

Written comments are preferred via email and may be submitted to VegetationTreatment@bof.ca.gov. Emailed comments should include your name, address, and daytime telephone number so a representative of the Board can contact you if clarifications regarding your comments are required.

Comments may also be mailed to the following address:

Board of Forestry and Fire Protection
ATTN: Edith Hannigan, Board Analyst
VTP Draft PEIR Comments
PO Box 944246
Sacramento, CA 94244-2460

All comments received, including names and addresses, will become part of the official public record. A Final PEIR will be prepared which will include responses to comments received during the public review period.

Sincerely,

Matt Dias
Acting Executive Officer, Board of Forestry & Fire Protection

Locations where PEIR can be reviewed:

Online:

http://bofdata.fire.ca.gov/board_committees/resource_protection_committee/current_projects/vegetation_treatment_program_environmental_impact_report_vtpeir/

California Board of Forestry and Fire Protection, 1416 9th Street, Sacramento, CA 95816 (by appointment during normal business hours; please call (916) 653-2928 in advance)

Libraries throughout the state; see VTP PEIR website for a list of locations
http://bofdata.fire.ca.gov/board_committees/resource_protection_committee/current_projects/vegetation_treatment_program_environmental_impact_report_vtpeir/

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Figure 1. Treatable acres under the VTP. Further discussion of the treatable acres is found in Chapter 2 of the Draft PEIR.

