



RURAL COUNTY REPRESENTATIVES
OF CALIFORNIA

August 30, 2022

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor, State of California
1021 O Street, Suite 9000
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Assembly Bill 1717 (Aguiar-Curry) — REQUEST FOR VETO

Dear Governor Newsom:

On behalf of the Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC), we respectfully yet strongly urge your veto of Assembly Bill 1717, authored by Assembly Member Cecilia Aguiar-Curry. This measure would expand the definition of “public works” to include fuel reduction work done under contract and paid for in part or whole by public funds, thereby requiring payment of prevailing wage. RCRC is an association of thirty-nine rural California counties, and the RCRC Board of Directors is comprised of elected supervisors from each of those member counties.

Over the past several years, California’s wildfire seasons have grown both longer and more severe each year, as climate change has exacerbated the decades-overdue need for better vegetation management and fuels treatment strategies around communities in the wildland urban interface (WUI). Many of these communities are socioeconomically disadvantaged, with all 26 of California’s economically disadvantaged counties containing lands designated as high or very high fire hazard severity zones, and are dependent on public funding such as grants from the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) to implement community fuels treatment and fire mitigation projects to safeguard their communities from wildfires.

Catastrophic wildfires also seriously threaten the state’s long-term climate change goals. Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from the 2020 wildfire season alone eclipsed the combined annual emissions of all of California’s industrial facilities statewide while covering the entire state in hazardous smoke for 45 consecutive days and 36 of California’s counties for 90 days. The 2020 and 2021 wildfire seasons also resulted in an estimated loss of 13 to 19 percent of the large sequoias in the Sierra Nevadas, and overall the state’s forest lands are expected to experience significant losses in carbon sequestration potential between now and the 2045 target year without a substantial uptick

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in the pace and scale of fuels treatment activities. The California Air Resources Board recommends increasing acres treated to 2.3 million annually, ten times the number currently achieved in the state, to achieve our GHG emissions reduction goals¹.

The ability to utilize GGRF and other public dollars through programs like California Climate Investments has afforded rural local governments the ability to undertake such vital projects as clearing dead and dying trees from critical infrastructure and residential properties during California's recent tree mortality epidemic, as well as completing community wildfire mitigation projects in concert with local fire prevention organizations to help safeguard residents from the impacts of devastating wildfires. Even still, many rural counties in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas could benefit from assistance accessing public, competitive grant funding to help initiate fire mitigation projects because they lack the staffing and financial ability to compete with more robustly resourced counties.

As the state recognizes the dramatic need to increase pace and scale of forest management and fire-prone counties continue to seek ways to maximize their ability to safeguard their residents from the devastation of wildfires, it seems ill-timed to introduce additional barriers to implementation of fire mitigation projects in communities that desperately need public funds to complete these projects. AB 1717 would increase the cost of crucial fire mitigation projects around communities and critical infrastructure by including these projects in the definition of "public works," thus subjecting them to prevailing wage.

RCRC has long advocated for increased training and development of a local forest management and wildfire prevention workforce. However, small local contractors, currently performing forest management work in rural communities, work on narrow margins making it difficult for them to meet the time, resources and cost associated with maintaining status as a prevailing wage employer. This results in the unfortunate consequence of shrinking local jobs for publicly funded forest resilience projects and causing unnecessary delays while local agencies search for available, out-of-area contractors to complete the work. It is vital that the state focus on creating a more robust forest resilience workforce in rural, disadvantaged communities before pursuing a measure like AB 1717, which would simply drive up costs of the scarce, out-of-area forest workforce currently in place while dramatically slowing the pace and scale of vegetation treatment projects on the ground.

Furthermore, AB 1717 will delay many other publicly funded projects done in conjunction with state, local and federal governments by complicating shrinking those dollars and limiting the scope and number of projects that can be done. The state will need to commit to increased funding for projects done by local governments and in concert with local organizations such as fire safe councils and resource conservation

¹ California Air Resources Board. (2022, May 10). *Draft 2022 Scoping Plan Update*. Retrieved August 30, 2022, from <https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/2022-draft-sp.pdf>

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districts if there is any hope of meeting California's crucial wildfire mitigation goals. State agencies such as CAL FIRE will also need to create new mechanisms to certify prevailing wage labor to complete state forest resilience projects, and the Department of Industrial Relations will necessarily undergo a significant and lengthy administrative process to develop a prevailing wage for a workforce that currently does not exist within organized labor.

The implications of paying prevailing wage for fuel reduction work has already been recognized this year in Assembly Bill 1644 (Flora), a bill which you signed into law on August 29, 2022. The provisions in AB 1644 would be nullified by AB 1717 after much good work to ensure that forest resilience and fuels treatment projects paid for by Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund dollars would not be delayed by the constraints of prevailing wage.

For the above reasons, we respectfully request your veto of AB 1717.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Staci Heaton", written in a cursive style.

STACI HEATON
Senior Policy Advocate

cc: The Honorable Cecilia Aguiar-Curry, Member of the State Assembly