

IV. Vegetation Management Program

Program Framework

The current Vegetation Management Program (VMP) is the continuation of the Range Improvement Program that existed in California from the 1950's to the 1970's. The Range Improvement Program was carried out by cooperative groups of ranchers who would band together to conduct prescribed burns primarily for range improvement objectives. These cooperatives had the equipment and expertise to conduct burn projects with limited to no assistance from fire agencies. These groups continued until the mid to late 1970's. At this time, liability issues, available cooperators and air quality restrictions all came together to essentially stop all non-governmental range improvement burning. This led to the passage of Senate Bill 1704, which was signed by Governor Brown Jr. on July 16, 1980. This bill authorized CDF to assume the liability and project implementation for prescribed burns on private property and thus created the Vegetation Management Program that is utilized by CDF today. The program became operational with the adoption of the Final Environmental Impact Report for the Chaparral Management Program on May 18, 1981.

The Vegetation Management Program provides CDF the authority to cooperatively treat vegetation and fuels on private lands. While a vegetation management project obviously improves private property values through reducing accumulated vegetation and increasing land management options, it also has benefits to the general public. The benefits to the general public include wildlife habitat improvement, increased water yield, air quality benefits of controlled releases of smoke during a prescribed project versus the uncontrolled release of smoke during a wildfire and most importantly the potential savings of significant taxpayers funds through increased success of fire suppression in areas treated with vegetation management projects versus areas not treated. *For additional information, see the "California Department of Forestry Chaparral Management Program Final Environmental Impact Report", May 18, 1981.*

A specific example of the public benefit of VMP from the Fresno-Kings Unit is the Beal Fuel Break. The Beal Fuel break is located in the Pine Ridge area of Fresno County along Highway 168. The Beal Fuel Break is a segment of the historic 650 mile long Ponderosa Way Fuel Break that was constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930's. It was last treated in 1995, through the Vegetation Management Program. The treatment utilized hand and mechanical methods to pile and burn vegetation. The maintenance cost \$163 per acre total or \$87 per acre in State operating funds. The arson caused Highway Fire, which burned from August 13-18, 2000, was ignited down-slope of the Beal and eventually burned into the fuel break. The fire was controlled at the fuel break. The cost to suppress the Highway Fire was \$1,304 per acre. Thus in this example, the cost of fuels treatment spent \$1,217 less of taxpayers funds, per acre, than fire suppression cost. *For additional information see Appendix C, Interaction Report for The*

Highway Fire (00FKU008628) and The Beal Fuel break (Rx 4-FKU-007) August 13-18, 2000.

Under the Vegetation Management Program, CDF utilizes a standardized program to address vegetation and fuels projects. Prior to project implementation a standardized formula is utilized to determine the private benefit versus the public benefit of a given project. Based on the formula, CDF may pay up to a maximum of ninety percent of a project's costs if it has a high public benefit. The participating landowner(s) and/or other cooperator(s) pay the remainder of the project's cost. The following categories are evaluated in determining private versus public benefits: Fire Hazard Reduction; Water Yields; Watershed Stabilization; Wildlife Habitat Improvement; Fisheries Habitat Improvement; Air Quality Improvement; and Range Forage Improvement. *For additional information on specific VMP implementation, see the "Vegetation Management Program Handbook and Field Guide", California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, June 2001.*

The Environmental Impact Report for the Chaparral Management Program, which was adopted in 1981, provides the statewide California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) clearance for VMP projects. This environmental clearance means that project that comply with the techniques and mitigations found in the Environmental Impact Report will not have a significant impact on the environment. The environmental analysis for the Chaparral Management Program was specific to lands containing "shrub formations" of all types. The term "Chaparral Management" was used because it was felt that a majority of the public understands that term as meaning "brush lands." Due to the fact that the environmental analysis for the Chaparral Management Program was specific to "lands containing shrub formations", the Vegetation Management Program can not be utilized on tree dominated landscapes. In the mid 1990's, CDF recognizing the need to expand the Vegetation Management Program to other than lands containing "shrub formations" under took development of a Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) to expand the use of Vegetation Management Program. This new PEIR was approved in June 2000. In January of 2002 the newly adopted PEIR was enjoined by the Superior Court of San Francisco County based on a lawsuit by Californians for Alternatives to Toxics and the Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC). At this time, for vegetation and fuels projects on lands other than those containing "shrub formations" CEQA must be met on an individual project basis. *For additional information on the PEIR see "Environmental Impact Report Handbook for Vegetation Management Program, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection", Prepared by Jones and Stokes, Sacramento, CA, July 2000.*

Fiscal Framework

The state funding support of the Vegetation Management Program recognizes the fact that many of the needed CDF resources to carry out a vegetation management project are in place and funded for fire suppression activities. Thus there are minimal added

expenses to CDF to carry out projects. The Fresno-Kings Unit is provided \$5 per acre, in augmented funding, to complete vegetation projects. This funding is intended to cover project expenses over and beyond normal operating expenses. This funding process was established when most VMP projects were large scale (several hundred to several thousand acre) range improvement projects. Due to the minimal amount of fire control line work needed versus the amount of acres that could be treated in a single prescribed fire project, the augmented funding was appropriate. In response to the urban intermix issue and the high assets at risk, CDF's Vegetation Management Program is now focusing more on small scale, intensive treatment projects adjacent to homes. These types of projects require intensive use of personnel and/or mechanical equipment. The result is small areas treated at high expenses compared to large scale range improvement projects. The \$5 per acre augmented funding is insufficient to cover these types of projects. Within the Fresno-Kings Unit, as well as the Madera-Mariposa-Merced Unit, Tulare Unit and the Contract County Kern, the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District is now charging a \$5 per acre smoke mitigation fee for all non-hazard reduction (PRC 4291) burn projects. This fee eliminates all augmented funding for vegetation management projects. Additional funding sources are needed to implement urban intermix vegetation management projects, or individual Units will need to choose to fund projects with operational dollars.

Program Setting

The Fresno-Kings Unit covers a very diverse geographic area. It extends from approximately the 4,000 foot elevation in the Coastal Range on the western side of the Unit then drops to near sea level through the San Joaquin Valley and then climbs again to approximately the 7,000 foot elevation in the Sierra Nevada Range, on the eastern side of the Unit. The vegetation complexes and corresponding fuel types change as one travels across this diverse topography.

Within the Unit, all Fire Behavior Fuel Models can be found. The grass models can be found on the valley floor and the eastern and western foothills. The brush models can be found at the mid to upper elevations on the western side of the Unit and between the oak woodlands and conifer forests on the eastern side of the Unit. The timber models can be found at the highest elevations in the Coastal Range and in the upper elevations on the eastern side of the Unit. The slash models can be found primarily in the northeastern portion of the Unit. This is where the majority of the commercial timber harvesting occurs within the CDF DPA. However, limited harvesting does occur within the Coastal Range and the southeastern portions of the Unit.

As well as topography and fuels, land ownership patterns vary greatly across the Unit. Within the Coastal Range portion of the Unit, ownerships are primarily large single owners. These ownerships range from several hundred acres to many thousands of acres. The owners are generally long term owners who are very knowledgeable of their lands and alternatives for land management. A large percentage of the CDF DPA in this area consists of public lands managed by BLM. As you descend out of the Coastal Range and

onto the valley floor the ownership pattern changes to a mixture of smaller rural residential ownerships (less than an acre to several hundred acres) and agricultural production lands. Within the eastern portion of the Unit, as you leave the valley floor there is a mixture of smaller dispersed rural residential ownerships (two (2) to five (5) acre parcels), several hundred to several thousand acre rangeland ownerships and now new subdivisions with lot sizes under two (2) acres. At the mid elevations, on the eastern side, there is a mixture of dispersed rural residential ownerships and mid sized parcels up to approximately several hundred acres. At the upper portions of the DPA, there is a mixture of small residential parcels (less than an acre), mid sized parcels up to approximately several hundred acres and the largest parcels are industrial timberlands up to several thousand acres. The following communities are all located within the DPA in the eastern portion of the Unit: Friant, Prather, Auberry, Tollhouse, Meadow Lakes, Shaver Lake, Piedra, Squaw Valley, Dunlap, Miramonte and Pinehurst. These communities all have high population concentrations and very small parcel sizes. Most of the smaller landowners on the eastern side of the Unit are new residents to the wildlands and are unfamiliar with wildfire and fuels management issues. Within the DPA in the eastern portion of the Unit are public lands managed by the California Department of Parks and Recreation, USDA Forest Service (Sierra and Sequoia National Forests) and the BLM.

Program History in the Unit

The combination of diverse topography, fuels and ownerships results in a diverse Vegetation Management Program for the Fresno-Kings Unit. Within the Unit, most VMP projects have focused on the western portion of the Unit. These projects were a mixture of range improvement and fuels reduction. The eastern portion of the Unit, has had limited VMP projects. Many that did occur were cooperative with the National Forests. The history of VMP in Fresno-Kings Unit is fragmented and scattered. The Unit did not have VMP Coordinator until 1999.

Future Program Direction

With the continuing development of the Unit's Prefire Management Plan, the Unit's Vegetation Management Program will be evolving also. Vegetation Management Projects will be responsive to the integrated planning approach of Prefire, Prevention and Vegetation Management. Projects will be developed and implemented to coordinate with Prefire objectives. It is anticipated new projects will focus on urban intermix areas. This will result in an increase in projects within the eastern portion of the Unit. However, as CDF vegetation management projects occur on private property unexpected interest in the program by landowners may alter immediate priorities.