

# I. Introduction

The danger of wildfire is a burden borne by every resident of California's mountains. This burden however, is one that we have created. Fire has always been part of our environment; only since Euro-American intervention has altered its natural cycle did it develop into the monster we now fear. In its natural form, wildfire serves to clean the landscape of dead and over mature vegetation, thus aiding in the regeneration of new growth. This process also makes wildfire self limiting, disallowing an unnatural accumulation of fuel that permits fire to grow to destructive proportions. By breaking this cycle we have began a trend of larger, more destructive fires that are both costly and dangerous. Placing our assets, such as homes and businesses, in wildfire's path has only succeeded in compounding the problem. In the last forty years California's losses due to wildfire have grown by 17% each decade. This trend cannot be allowed to continue.

Since we have created the danger of wildfire, we can also mitigate that danger. In 1996, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) began to take steps to reverse the course we have been on for the past century. CDF's 1996 Fire Plan outlined a strategy to assess the current situations that exist in our state's wildland and identify areas of high hazard. Partnerships with stakeholders, private industry, agencies and organizations that have a vested interest in wildfire, protection/prevention in our communities, would be built and together plans to mitigate those hazards would be developed.

The Madera-Mariposa-Merced Unit protects 3,573,778 acres of watershed in eastern Madera, Mariposa and western Merced Counties. Within this area, four factors considered keys in determining the severity of the wildfire problem were assessed: Assets at risk (values threatened by fire), fuels available to wildfire, level of service and weather. To further assist with solving the wildfire threat, "Fire Councils" were created to facilitate communication among stakeholders and involve everyone in the problem and the search for solutions. Their input is reflected in this report as well as quantitative "on the ground" validation.

The Madera-Mariposa-Merced Unit Fire Plan is broken down into chapters. The first chapter will acquaint the reader with history of fire in our local fire environment. This was done to provide the reader with an insight as to how fire has and should behave in its normal state. The following chapters will present the findings of each individual assessment. Following these are the cumulative results of the assessments, identifying and ranking our hazard areas on State Responsibility Areas (SRA) within MMU. The writing of subsequent chapters will be an ongoing project. Each hazard area will require its own unique prescription to reduce the threat of wildfire. These prescriptions will be the result of the individual characteristics of the problem, funds available to finance mitigation and the input provided by the stakeholders.

As our mountain communities continue to grow, this plan must also grow. Each new resident brings with them the potential for fire ignition as well as values that must be protected. With inevitable population growth, the threat of wildfire in our community is also inevitable. By assessing our risks and incorporating prefire management strategies in our planning, we can develop a community that can survive the impacts of wildfire.