Gov. Gavin Newsom declares emergency in California amid wildfire threats

Kurtis Alexander  |  March 22, 2019  |  Updated: March 22, 2019 8:53 p.m.

California's efforts to prevent another year of catastrophic wildfire took a step forward Friday when Gov. Gavin Newsom declared a rare statewide emergency, clearing the path for dozens of forest-thinning projects aimed at reducing fire danger.

The declaration suspends permitting and regulatory requirements that might
otherwise stand in the way of fuel-reduction work in 35 high-hazard areas.
California fire officials have said widespread clearing of trees and brush is needed quickly at the sites to make sure overcrowded forests don’t explode into flames and burn more homes and communities.

Since taking office in January, Newsom has sought to make fire prevention a top priority in the wake of Butte County’s Camp Fire. The November blaze killed 85 people and destroyed nearly 19,000 buildings. The governor has proposed a number of tactics but is putting the 35 forestry projects at the forefront with the unusual step of removing red tape.

“Some of these projects quite literally, not figuratively, could take two years to get done but we can get them done in the next two months,” Newsom said Friday after signing the emergency declaration. “The fire season is right around the corner, and we cannot once again be (caught) flat-footed.”

The governor’s office estimates that more than 200 communities will benefit from the work. The projects range from creating an 11-mile-long fuel break in Orinda and Lafayette, to 467 acres of forest thinning along Kings Mountain Road in Woodside, to vegetation clearing on 6,843 acres in Big Sur. In all, the work will cover 94,000 acres statewide.

The effort will be funded with $30 million allotted in this year’s state budget for forestry work. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire, has already beefed up its efforts by hiring six crews solely for fuel reduction work. The governor recently called up about 100 California National Guard service members to help out as well.

While many praised Newsom’s directive, critics in the science community questioned whether the thinning projects are worth the expense.

Some worried that the work is akin to logging and that clearing too many trees will undermine the goal of fire protection by hastening the growth of smaller, more flammable vegetation. Even in cases where fuel reduction might slow the spread of a fire, knowing where to do the work — that is, where a fire will burn — is next to impossible, they say.

“We share the governor’s urgency to act on wildfire but we think he’s taking the wrong approach,” said Shaye Wolf, climate science director at the Center for
Wolf is among many who are also concerned about doing away with environmental reviews under the emergency declaration. She said such evaluations can help determine whether the projects are worthwhile.

“They’re taking a Trump-like approach, focusing on logging and rolling back critical environmental protections,” she said.

California’s fire-prone forests caught Trump’s eye after the Camp Fire. He has since called for the large-scale clearing of trees and blamed state regulation for hampering safety efforts, even though most of the state’s forests are federally managed. He’s threatened to withhold disaster aid if the situation doesn’t improve.

Newsom’s emergency declaration suspends California’s Public Resources Code requirements for the thinning projects and allows the state to contract for outside help without competitive bidding. Under the directive, Cal Fire officials will be able to shortcut typical procedures and simply seek an OK for their work from the state agency regulating the activity — for example, the California Environmental Protection Agency.

The governor signed Friday’s order in Lake County, an area that in recent years has seen several big blazes, including the 2018 Mendocino Complex Fire. Many there applauded Newsom’s action.

“We are looking to the governor’s office to really help us,” said Lake County Supervisor Moke Simon, who represents the communities of Cobb and Middletown, both hit hard by the Valley Fire in 2015.

Speaking at the Middletown Library, Newsom said the 35 “priority” forestry projects were part of a broader suite of fire-prevention strategies. The governor and Cal Fire officials acknowledged that thinning is no cure-all, but it’s a start in addressing 15 million acres of California forest that are in bad health because of drought, insect infestation and a history of poor wildland management practices.

Newsom said the state also will be working on retrofitting buildings to make them more fire-resistant and clearing vegetation immediately around homes — approaches recommended by many who question the thinning projects.
In addition, the governor announced Friday the start of a campaign to ensure that residents of small communities are familiar with their local emergency plans.

Lastly, Newsom introduced a program that will seek technological and scientific input from the private sector on ways to improve fire safety. Cal Fire Director Thom Porter called it a way to “work with innovators” and “think outside the box.”

This century, only two other statewide emergencies have been issued. Gov. Jerry Brown declared one during the drought in 2014 and another in reaction to the resulting tree die-off in 2015.

Newsom’s declaration follows California’s biggest fire year in modern times. More than 1.8 million acres burned statewide in 2018.

“2017 was the worst fire season in California history until 2018,” Newsom said. “We cannot allow 2019 to maintain that status. We gotta do more. We gotta do better.”

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