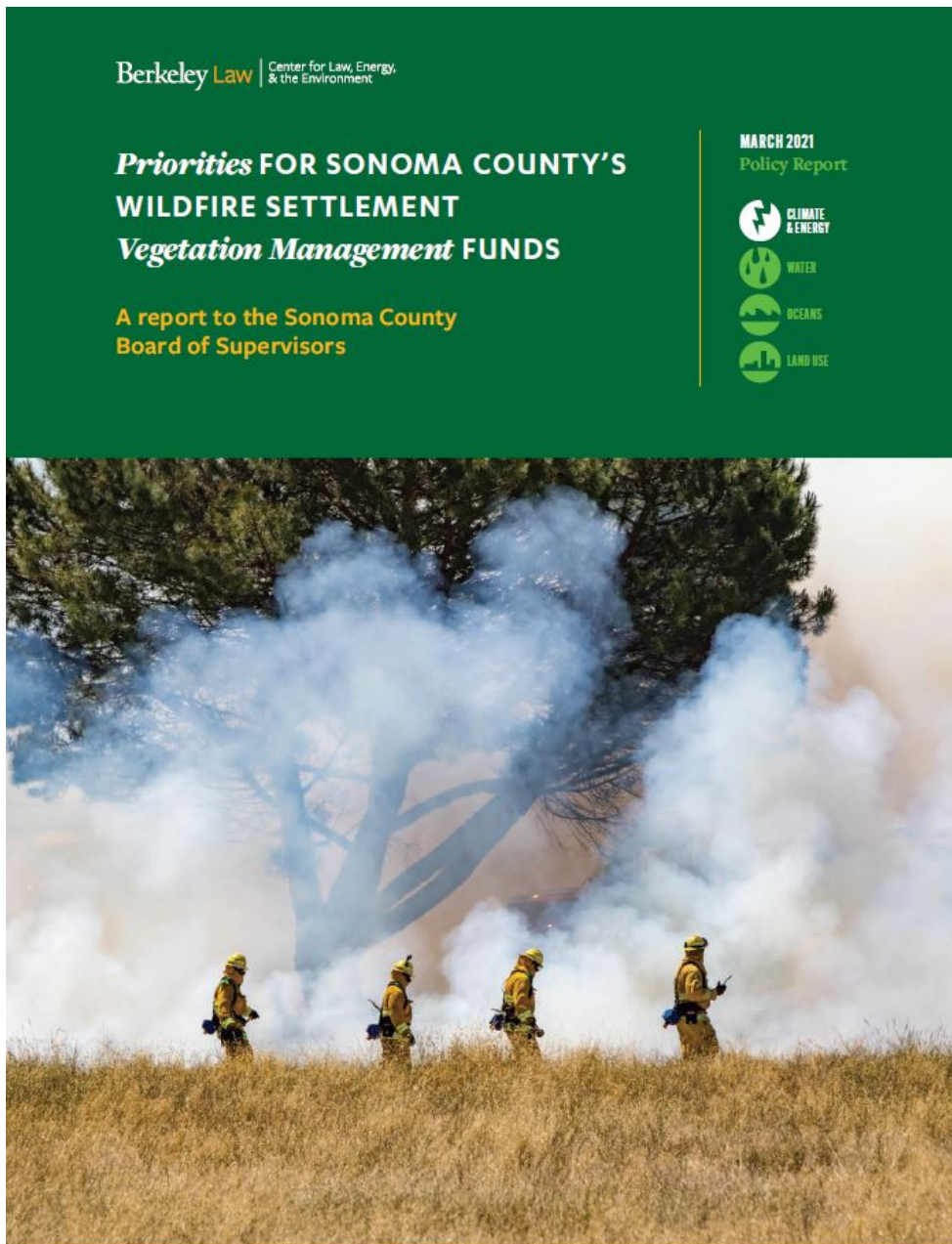


The \$25 Million Question: How Sonoma County Can Spend Vegetation Management Funds to Bolster Wildfire Resilience | 1



How would you spend \$25 million to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire through vegetation management? Sonoma County leaders found themselves facing this question and enlisted UC Berkeley School of Law's Center for Law, Energy and the Environment (CLEE) for help. Today, CLEE is releasing a [report](#) with specific recommendations for Sonoma County, which we hope can serve as a model for other local and state governments and community groups as they work to address the increasing risk from wildfires.

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Where did Sonoma County get this funding? In 2017, 2019, and 2020, wildfires ravaged the county, burning approximately one-third of the total land area, destroying thousands of structures, and taking dozens of lives. In the aftermath of the 2017 fires, several California governments (including Sonoma County agencies) sued Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E)—the electric and gas utility—based on evidence that the company’s electrical equipment played a role in igniting the fires. In 2020, PG&E and Sonoma County reached a \$149 million settlement, with the expectation that funds will be allocated towards a variety of wildfire recovery and prevention activities. The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors ultimately directed at least \$25 million of the total \$149 million towards vegetation management efforts.

County leaders engaged CLEE to deliver recommendations on how to spend the dollars effectively. Through two expert convenings and stakeholder outreach, CLEE gathered input from leaders in wildfire science, public finance, planning, and vegetation management, among other areas of expertise. One of the convenings focused entirely on local experts, leveraging the wealth of knowledge within Sonoma County and learning from local organizations’ experiences. The other convening included state-level experts who could speak to broader experiences and priorities throughout California.

Both groups’ priorities and insights led to several key recommendations to guide vegetation management spending in Sonoma County. Driving most of these was the fact that a limited pool of near-term funds cannot adequately address the County’s long-term, recurring vegetation management needs; thus, leaders should invest in financing mechanisms, workforce development, and community outreach efforts that can generate new funds and incentivize private action. That said, a portion of funds - approximately one third - should be directed toward the highest-priority actions that can be taken in advance of coming fire seasons, to help reduce near-term risk and accelerate existing initiatives. And, to support effective and efficient long-term investments, the County should create a vegetation management governance capacity. Ultimately, \$25 million is insufficient to cover the scale of the need. But it can help jumpstart demonstration projects, fund immediate needs, and leverage additional funds. The key recommendations and principles to guide vegetation management in Sonoma County include:

1. **Funding immediate vegetation management activities**, especially in high-risk and high-priority areas and near key ecosystems. Initial activities should consider specific project zones (such as densely populated areas or areas that burned in recent fires), as well as project types (such as defensible space near buildings or understory thinning in forested areas).
2. **Centralizing stakeholder coordination and governance** to improve efficiency and

ensure that the right projects are funded as quickly as possible, especially early action projects before the upcoming fire season.

3. **Prioritizing equity, community outreach, and education** so that all communities benefit from and understand their role in vegetation management actions. Understanding different stakeholders' needs and keeping open lines of communication will be crucial components of successful vegetation management and are also cost-effective methods of scaling up projects.
4. **Maintaining relevant and up-to-date data sources for planning and evaluation**, so that various analytical efforts and interactive tools draw from the most recent information. Monitoring and evaluation are also critical to tracking vegetation management projects' impact and scope over time, allowing project managers to adjust implementation as needed.
5. **Leveraging long-term financial sustainability**, so that funds are replenished and Sonoma County can transform the initial \$25 million allocation into a much larger, continually renewing source for ongoing vegetation management activities. Options include a revolving fund, financing districts, resilience bonds, new local sales or parcel tax revenue, and leveraging federal and state dollars, among other options.
6. **Building the local workforce** will help Sonoma County tackle both short- and long-term vegetation management needs while creating high-quality local jobs. Workforce development options include a multi-year training program, partnerships with local conservation corps and educational institutions, apprenticeship programs, and labor share programs, among several other options.

Participants also developed a set of principles to guide County vegetation management decisions, including:

- **Prioritizing vulnerable communities** (including lower-income residents, elders, renters, communities of color, and those most affected by air quality impacts), along with critical infrastructure and special assets
- **Incorporating and supporting robust public outreach**, engagement, and education at every step
- **Accomplishing multiple forest and ecosystem health objectives** by performing and monitoring high-quality, science-based treatments
- Recognizing effective vegetation management requires **continuous, dedicated implementation** in an adaptive management framework
- **Leveraging** by seeking other funding opportunities and creating sustainable funding mechanisms

While every California county—and indeed every wildfire-prone region in the world—has

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different circumstances and resources, these ideas could help inform vegetation management conversations beyond Sonoma County's borders. Wildfires are part of natural systems, but development expanding into wildland areas and hotter, drier conditions caused by climate change increase the likelihood and severity of fire across the state. These worsening conditions, combined with decades of fire suppression, position California for a future of more catastrophic wildfires unless there is a dedicated, coordinated, and locally tailored vegetation management effort to address risks facing forests, ecosystems, and communities.

We hope this report will help Sonoma County and leaders across California take immediate action to mitigate risks during the upcoming fire season and implement a long-term strategy to reduce the severity of wildfires in the years to come.

You can download the report [here](#).

We will be presenting the report findings at the virtual Sonoma County Board of Supervisors meeting today (Tuesday), March 23, 2021, which starts at 8:30 am Pacific Time (our presentation is scheduled for later in the meeting). You can access the agenda [here](#), which includes Zoom login information, to listen in or offer your own comments.