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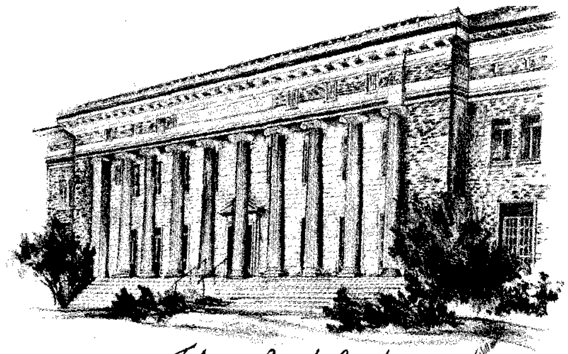

Tehama County Courthouse

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wildfire Reform

Wildfire Reform Should Protect Communities — Not Shift Costs to Local Taxpayers
California must continue working aggressively to prevent catastrophic wildfires, strengthen utility infrastructure, and make our communities more resilient. But as state leaders consider changes to California's wildfire liability system, one principle should remain clear: when a utility causes a wildfire, the financial consequences should not be shifted to the communities and taxpayers harmed by that fire. Proposals being considered in Sacramento could limit the ability of counties, cities, special districts, and other public agencies to recover costs resulting from utility-caused wildfires. For rural counties such as Tehama County, that could have serious consequences.

When wildfire strikes, local government cannot wait for insurance settlements, federal reimbursements, or years of litigation before responding. Roads must be cleared. Water and sewer systems must be restored. Emergency services must continue. Public facilities must be repaired, and communities need the infrastructure necessary for residents and businesses to rebuild.

Under the current system, when utility equipment causes a wildfire and damages public infrastructure, the responsible utility may be required to compensate the affected public agency. Proposed changes could substantially limit that recovery, including potentially valuing destroyed public infrastructure based on its depreciated value rather than the actual cost of replacing it. That distinction matters.

A decades-old road, sewer line, water system, fire station, or other public facility cannot necessarily be rebuilt for its depreciated accounting value. Local government must pay what it actually costs to restore the infrastructure the community needs. Without adequate recovery, those costs do not disappear — they are transferred to local taxpayers or result in delayed reconstruction and reduced public services.

Emergency Response Cannot Wait
The same concern applies to emergency response and mutual aid. Counties, cities, fire agencies, law enforcement, public works departments, and other first responders act

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immediately during a disaster. Proposals that prevent public agencies from recovering emergency-response and mutual-aid costs from a responsible utility could leave local governments paying those expenses while hoping for eventual reimbursement from the federal government.

FEMA is not a substitute for responsible party recovery. Not every wildfire qualifies for federal assistance, reimbursement can take years, and local agencies generally must spend the money first. The local-government coalition also warns that restricting recovery could create problems for California's mutual-aid system, particularly for smaller jurisdictions with limited financial capacity. For rural counties operating with limited discretionary resources, absorbing millions of dollars in unexpected disaster costs can affect services far beyond the fire itself.

Wildfires Also Damage the Local Tax Base

The impact of a catastrophic wildfire continues long after the flames are extinguished. Destroyed homes and businesses can reduce property-tax revenue at precisely the time local government faces extraordinary expenses associated with emergency response and rebuilding. Property taxes help support law enforcement, fire protection, social services, infrastructure, and other essential local services.

Proposals that eliminate recovery for lost property-tax revenues therefore create a double financial impact: local governments face increased costs while simultaneously losing revenue. According to the local-government coalition, public-agency damages represented only about 4 percent of total wildfire claims paid by utilities between 2017 and 2024. Shifting even those costs away from responsible utilities does not eliminate them. Someone still pays. Ultimately, that someone may be the taxpayer, the insurance policyholder, the wildfire survivor, or the community receiving fewer public services.

Accountability and Prevention Can Work Together

Opposing a transfer of wildfire liability does not mean opposing wildfire reform. California should continue making substantial investments in wildfire prevention and resilience. Counties support stronger grid hardening, vegetation management, fuel reduction, faster mitigation projects, home hardening, defensible-space programs, improved fire-hazard information, and financing mechanisms that help communities reduce wildfire risk. The broader coalition of local governments, wildfire survivors, insurers, and community organizations has similarly called for better statewide coordination, improved risk-assessment tools, community-level mitigation, hazardous-fuel reduction, and stronger connections between risk reduction and insurance availability and affordability.

California can pursue those reforms while maintaining accountability.
In fact, accountability can encourage prevention. Strong liability standards create a financial incentive for utilities to harden their systems, manage vegetation, modernize infrastructure, and operate safely. Weakening those consequences risks reducing an important incentive to prevent fires in the first place.

Protect Rural California

Wildfire is not an abstract policy issue for rural California. It is an ongoing threat to our residents, businesses, infrastructure, public finances, and way of life. Tehama County supports meaningful reforms that prevent wildfires, improve utility safety, strengthen community resilience, and help make insurance more available and affordable. But wildfire reform should not protect one party by transferring its financial responsibility to another. If utility equipment causes a catastrophic wildfire, residents who lost their homes should also not be asked to pay higher taxes to rebuild the public infrastructure that was destroyed. Local governments should not have to choose between restoring essential services and maintaining already constrained budgets.

California's wildfire policy should focus on preventing fires before they happen, protecting communities when they do, and maintaining accountability when negligence causes catastrophic harm. **Wildfire reform should make California safer — not leave rural communities holding the bill.**

On behalf of the Tehama County Board of Supervisors