Resolution 19-01

Sponsors: California Municipal Utilities Association; Sacramento Municipal Utility District; Southern California Public Power Authority; Banning Electric Utility; Trinity Public Utility District; Northern California Power Agency; Washington Public Utility Districts Association; Irrigation and Electrical Districts Association of Arizona; Chelan County Public Utility District; Northwest Public Power Association

In Support of Reducing Wildfire Risk by Adequately Funding Fire Suppression and Forest Health Programs

Recent fires in the West have had a devastating impact on natural resources, property, and lives—including on public power facilities and employees. Wildfires have ravaged communities and left some local economies in ruins. The U.S. Department of Commerce estimates the total economic cost to communities caused by the 2018 wildfire season alone to be upwards of $350 billion. While recently enacted changes to the way catastrophic wildfires are funded will generate benefits in the future, Congress must ensure immediate needs for fire suppression, prevention, and overall forest health are adequately funded.

Large-scale, catastrophic fires throughout the Western U.S. are occurring with increasing frequency and severity. These fires touch the lives and operations of public power utilities, their employees, and the communities they serve. Generating units, transmission and distribution lines, communications equipment, and utility buildings traverse the 640 million acres of federal land in the U.S., making publicly owned utilities integral partners and stakeholders in reducing wildfire risk and promoting healthy, well-managed forests.

Public power has long advocated for an overhaul to federal wildfire management policies and funding challenges. The flawed practice of “fire-borrowing”—in which the Forest Service uses funds from non-fire accounts to support fire suppression when costs exceed the amount appropriated for the year—was intended to be an extraordinary measure, but as fire seasons have grown more destructive and costly, it has become common practice year after year. Because this cycle continually decimated resources from programs essential to fire prevention and maintaining healthy forests, it has led to a pattern of more devastating fires and increased risks to infrastructure, wildlife, and human life.

Legislation was enacted in 2018 to end the practice of fire-borrowing by establishing an emergency reserve account that the Forest Service can draw from instead of borrowing from non-fire programs. However, this fix does not come into effect until 2020. As a result, Congress must be prepared to swiftly approve supplemental appropriations for suppression costs to ensure other forest health programs are not raided yet again if 2019’s fire season proves as severe as recent years.
New federal guidelines that will be implemented in 2019 regarding vegetation management in utility rights-of-way will help improve the safety of electrical infrastructure and reduce wildfire risk by streamlining the approval process for these activities. To maximize these benefits, the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and other federal land managers must work closely with public power utilities to ensure the new guidelines are implemented effectively and efficiently.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED: That the American Public Power Association supports adequate funding for wildfire suppression to ensure existing forest management programs, including fire prevention and vegetation management practices, have the resources necessary to be implemented effectively, promote forest health, and reduce wildfire risk.