

# GAP FIRE REPORT

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## SUMMARY

Siskiyou County has High to Extreme fire potential according to Cal Fire’s Fire and Resource Assessment Program (FRAP)(see Map 1). Climate warming trends combined with heavy fuel loading in our forests continue to present an increasing threat of wildfire to our citizens and wildlife (see chart 1). These wildfires are increasing in frequency and intensity which is putting Siskiyou County citizens

and the entire forest at risk. Our unique forested landscape is not only attractive to tourism, but also serves to provide our County with sustainable timber harvesting in perpetuity.

Siskiyou County citizens can all participate in efforts to help fire-safe their homes and property in the event of fire by following the laws about defensible space, signing up for the early warning phone system (Code Red), and getting involved in one of the many Fire Safe Councils in the County.

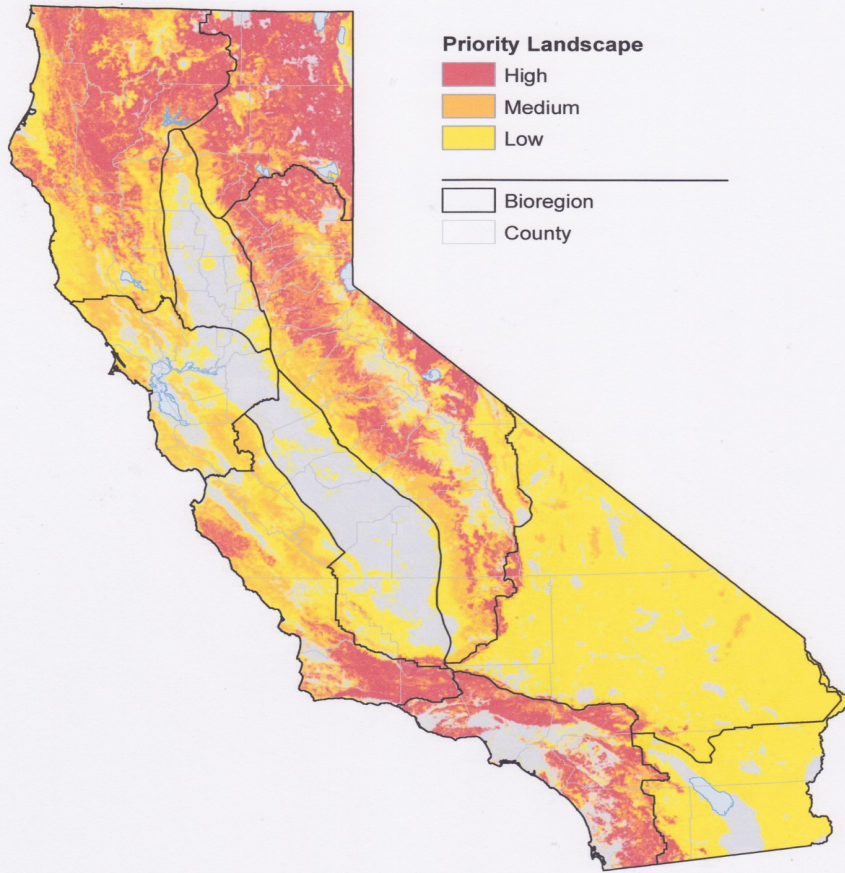


Figure 2.1.5.  
Priority landscape for preventing wildfire threats to maintain ecosystem health.  
Data Sources: California Fire Regime Condition Class, FRAP (2003); California Tree Seed Zones, Buck, et al. (1970);  
Fire Threat, FRAP (2005); Statewide Land Use / Land Cover Mosaic, FRAP (2006)

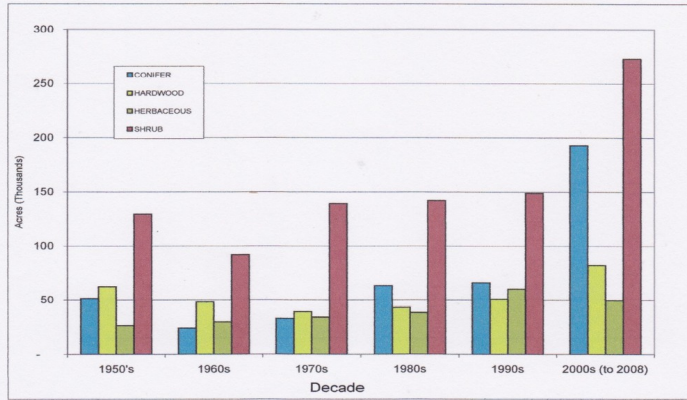


Figure 2.1.2. Annual acres burned by decade and by life form, 1950s to 2000s. Data Sources: Fire Perimeters, FRAP (2009 v1); Statewide Land Use / Land Cover Mosaic, FRAP (2006)

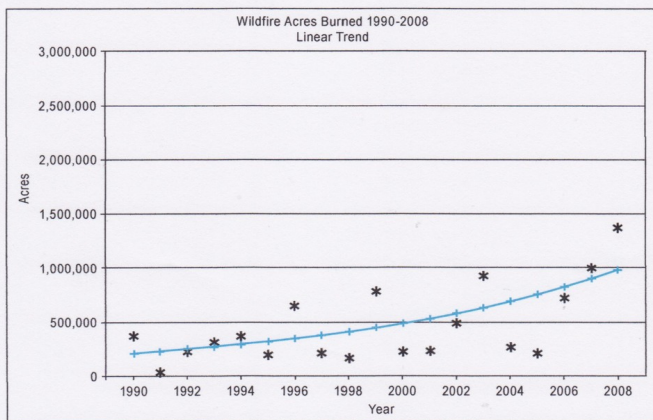
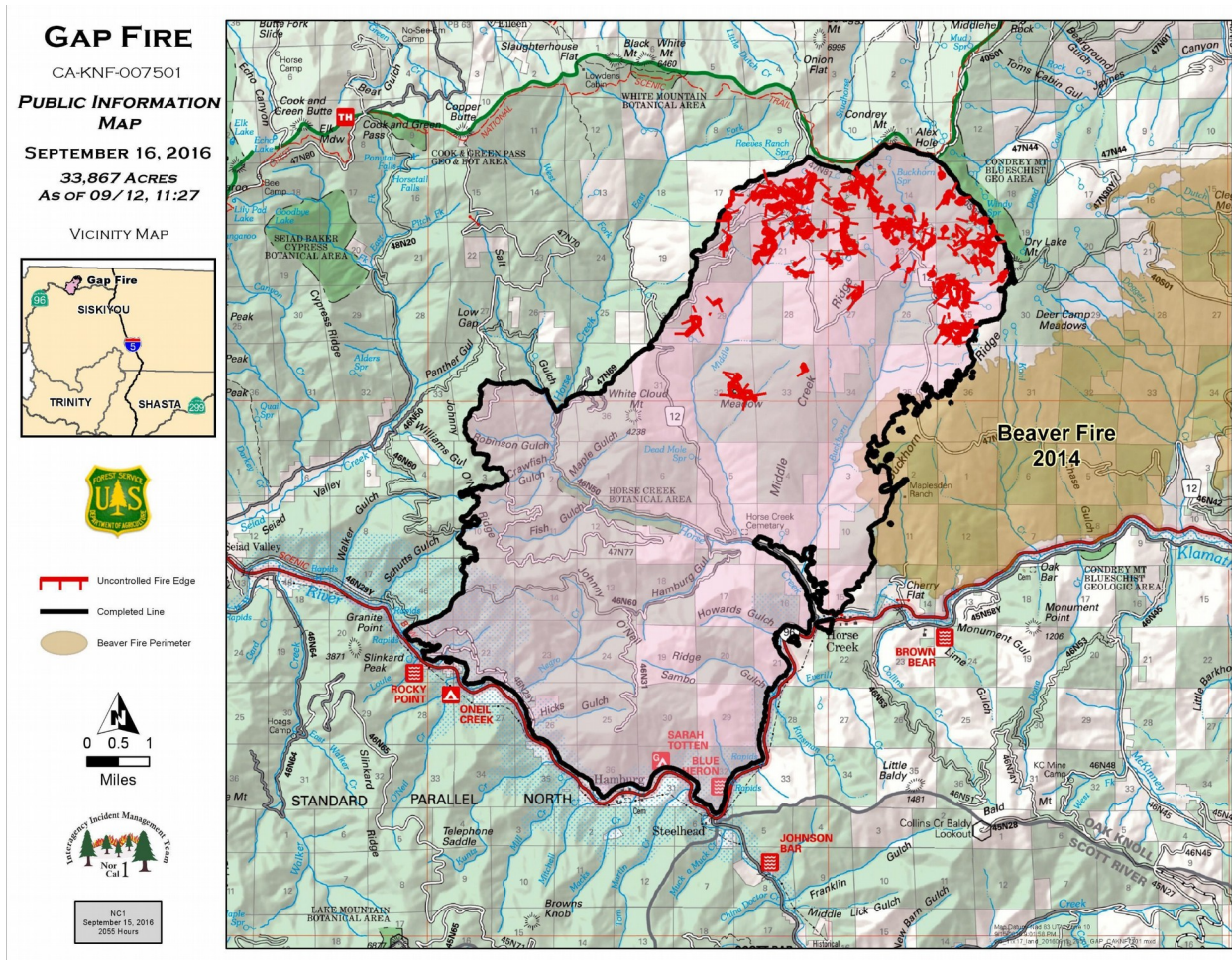


Figure 2.1.3. Log-linear trend model for annual acres burned as a function of time, 1990–2008. Data Sources: Fire Perimeters, FRAP (2009 v1); Statewide Land Use / Land Cover Mosaic, FRAP (2006)

Chart 1

## BACKGROUND

The Siskiyou County Civil Grand Jury received complaints in 2017 about property destruction resulting from the wildfire known as the GAP fire. The increasing frequency and intensity of fires makes the topic of fire safety an important one for all citizens. The Grand Jury felt compelled to get more information on this matter.



Map 2

## METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury interviewed residents who lost homes and property in the GAP Fire, a fire official, United States Forest Service (USFS) Officials, County employees, and members of Fire Safe Councils. Members attended public Fire Safe Council meetings. Extensive research was also done on the internet. The webpages visited and used in this report will be cited in the DISCUSSION section of this report.

## DISCUSSION

The wildfire known as the GAP Fire started at 6:00 PM on August 27, 2016. CALFIRE declared management of this wildfire to be the responsibility of the USFS Klamath National Forest (KNF) at 6:15 PM the next day. KNF declared the fire 100% contained on September 17, 2016 at 6:00 PM.

Incident Information provided by KNF ([inciweb.nwcg.gov](http://inciweb.nwcg.gov)) indicated the 33,867 acre fire (Map 2) was still attended by 532 personnel on March 2, 2017 and was still 100% contained. They also reported the cause of the fire which started in Low Gap as unknown and that the fuels involved were: “Heavy fuel loading in a closed canopy timber. Significant dead and down component exists. No recent fire history within the current fire area. Steep terrain with limited access. ERC’s [Energy Release Component] at record levels. Snags are frequent within the old Beaver Fire scar on the eastern edge of the fire.”

They also reported as Significant Events: “Fire remained within existing control lines. Interior pockets of heat remain with minimal fire behavior.”

We would draw your attention to the above statement: “ERC’s at record levels”. The Energy Release Component relates to the condition of the fuels and reflects the condition of all live and dead fuels to potential fire intensity.



Evacuations remained in place from August 27 until 5:30 PM September 7, 2016. According to YubaNet ([yubanet.com/Fires/gap/.](http://yubanet.com/Fires/gap/)) the GAP Fire destroyed 14 structures and employed 945 personnel.

Interviews with local residents touched upon their concerns with the timing of evacuation notifications and with congestion and confusion once evacuations began. Residents reported feeling a lack of notification. They believe that there could have been much earlier evacuation notices allowing for a more organized evacuation from the Horse Creek area. Residents reported that once the fire was upon them and evacuations were underway confusion and chaos ensued.

Interviews with USFS employees, County employees, and reviews of reports issued by various agencies indicate fire response was slowed due to downed trees across a Forest Service access road that required fire crews to backtrack and find alternate routes.

While most of the concerns discussed were about private property loss and protection from wildfires, the Grand Jury also looked into the overall health of the National Forests (NF) in Siskiyou County.

These two issues relate to each other especially where the NF lands abut private property. This abutment is known as the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). The other reason for this inquiry into the overall health of the NF is the increasing potential for extreme fire events due to heavy fuel loading.

The increasing intensity of extreme fire events has the potential to make private property loss inevitable, even when cleared (fire-safed). As witnessed during the GAP Fire and Boles Fire, hot weather combined with high winds can create a blowtorch effect, destroying everything in its path. The steep topography combined with extreme weather and heavy fuel loading creates a “perfect storm” scenario as the intensity of the fires pulls the air in creating a bellows effect, especially in the steep gulches and canyons of Siskiyou County. These extreme fire events have the potential to destroy healthy forests where they could otherwise survive a ‘normal’ fire.

Siskiyou County is home to several government agencies and private organizations that are tasked with addressing the fire hazard situation here. These include CALFIRE, US Forest Service (Klamath National Forest, Shasta-Trinity, Modoc, Six Rivers and Rogue-Siskiyou national forests), local fire districts, and local Fire Safe Councils (FSCs). The FSCs are local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

The above mentioned agencies and NGOs do more than just fight wildfires; they are also tasked with management of our local forests. Active forest management can entail a wide range of activities including but not limited to fuel load reduction, understory thinning, timber harvesting, and reforestation.

Federal, State and local legislation also address the issue of wildfire suppression and prevention, including the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 (Public Law 108-148), California Public Resources Code 4290, 4291 and Siskiyou County Building Division requirements for CALFIRE to insure new applications meet PRC 4290 and 4291. The Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 (Act) Section 2 (3) states that one of the purposes of the Act is:

(3) to enhance efforts to protect watersheds and address threats to forest and rangeland health, including catastrophic wildfire, across the landscape. The Act also defines Wildland-Urban Interface as an area within or adjacent to an at-risk community and goes on to further definitions. (Sec. 101-16). Section 102 (a) states that:

*As soon as practicable after the enactment of this Act, the Secretary [Secretary of Agriculture] shall implement authorized hazardous fuel reduction projects, consistent with the Implementation Plan, on -(1) Federal land in wildland-urban interface areas;...*

This 33 page Act goes on to authorize funding through direct-funding to USFS including grants to states, local governments, Indian tribes, and other eligible recipients for activities authorized by law. (Sec. 108-2) Further research is needed to discover how these authorized funds have been spent for fire prevention efforts in Siskiyou County and is beyond the scope of this report. California Public Resources Code (PRC) 4291 requires property owners in the WUI to create and maintain fire breaks and vegetation clearances as well as other requirements. In the introduction to PRC 4291, this summary is included: *This law was enacted to prevent fire that originates in structures or on premises to spread into forested areas. It was also created to minimize the chances of a forest fire entering into populated areas and destroying improved property and endangering human life. The history of damaging fires has shown the most devastating danger is the risk of fire originating in the wildland and transmitting itself into improved areas. Most statutory hazard reduction requirements and other hazard reduction measures are based upon this concept. However, the risk of wildfire originating on or about structures and their premises is great, and also causes historically damaging fires. The statutory hazard reduction requirements, and other hazard and risk measures, also mitigate the occurrence of structure and premise wildfire ignitions. PRC 4291 does not apply to a specific jurisdiction, but does apply to specific fuel conditions which are identified in the opening paragraph.*

There are currently two bills in committee in the United States House of Representatives that address active forest management that is critical to wildfire prevention. These bills are H.R.2613 and H.R.2862, and have been sitting in committee for 9 months.

While there continues to be great effort on the part of the responsible Federal, State and local government agencies and the Fire Safe Councils, the problem of wildfire in Siskiyou County continues to be a threat to the health and safety of our citizens as well as the health of our forestlands.



## FINDINGS

F1. The Gap fire started near the top of Johnny O'Neil Ridge in the Seiad Creek watershed at 6pm on August 27, 2016 and spread quickly into the Horse Creek watershed and into the community of Horse Creek where it destroyed nine homes. The rapid expansion of the fire was due to heavy fuel loading, record level ERCs and intense downslope winds.

F2. Fire crews were prevented from accessing the fire from Horse Creek due to a dangerous downfall on forest road 47N77, requiring them to move to Seiad Creek Road.

F3. The exact cause of the Gap fire remains unknown but is attributed to human activity as the weather was clear.

F4. USFS states that "evacuations remained in place from August 27 until 5:30 September 7, 2016. Some local residents claim they were not notified until the next night when the fire was burning into the community and the Sheriff's department was dispatched to facilitate evacuations.

F5. The intensity and rapid spread of this wildfire created a traffic jam on the Horse Creek Bar Road between responding fire crews and citizens evacuating.

F6. There is significant Federal, State and County legislation designed to address the prevention and suppression of wildfires.

F7. In spite of the legislation mentioned in F6, not enough is actually being done and two federal bills that should help prevent future wildfires, H.R.2613 and H.R.2862 have been sitting in committee for 9 months.

F8. Most professional foresters agree that "Active forest management is the most important tool in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and lowering the threat and severity of wildfires..." (Stewart 2010).

F9. There are 22 local Fire Safe Councils in Siskiyou County tasked with fire prevention (fire-saefing) on private property and, while most are very active, there is a lack of funding and coordination.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. Although nothing can be done about “intense downslope winds”, the issue of “record level ERCs” due to heavy fuel loading can and should be addressed. The Siskiyou County the Board of Supervisors (BOS) is the representative voice for the citizens of Siskiyou County; we therefore recommend the BOS take a proactive role in putting pressure on any and all legislation at the Federal and State level that addresses fire prevention in our County.

R2. As the Grand Jury is unable to influence State and Federal agencies, we recommend the BOS implore the USFS and CALFIRE to keep all access roads clear of fallen trees and other hazards.

R3. Unable to find out if the investigation into the cause of the Gap Fire is ongoing, we recommend the BOS open its own investigation to find out if there may be a case for negligence or intent.

R4. It is still not exactly clear what the methods and timelines were for evacuation notification. What is clear is that Horse Creek residents were not given ample time to evacuate. We recommend the BOS review County-wide evacuation procedures and communications protocols including the Code Red system and implement an effective plan for timely notices.

R5. We recommend the BOS review coordination and communication procedures between the Siskiyou County Sheriff and all fire agencies, including CALFIRE and USFS, for traffic control.

R6. We recommend the BOS do research into all the relevant legislation in order to bring more resources and funding into our County for fuel treatment and fire suppression.

R7. We have attempted to find out why H.R.2613 and H.R.2862 are tied up in committee but have had no response from either our Representative or Senator. We recommend the BOS contact them to determine what can be done to get this vital legislation enacted.



R8. Active forest management is necessary to the health and welfare of our citizens and the forest itself. If H.R.2613 can be encouraged through active involvement of our BOS, perhaps a clear path forward in how we can approach the responsible management of our County's natural resources can be obtained.

R9. The 22 local Fire Safe Councils in Siskiyou County are the only resource we have to assist private property owners in making their homes more safe from wildfire. Most of these local Councils act independently to acquire funding, buy equipment and hire workers to perform this vital task. We recommend the BOS involve the County in the Fire Safe Council of Siskiyou County with the goal of bringing all local FSCs under one organization for the purpose of efficiency. i.e.: sharing of equipment, workers and other resources, bringing paperwork, reporting, grant writing and fund raising under one roof and ensuring all local FSC's receive their fair share of such.

## **REQUESTS FOR RESPONSE**

The Siskiyou County Civil Grand Jury respectfully requests the County Board of Supervisors to respond to this Report, specifically R1 through R9. The Sheriff's Department is invited to respond to R5.

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Civil Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides such information.

## **Recommended Reading:**

California Forest Carbon Plan: Managing our Forest Landscapes in a Changing Climate, (CALFIRE, CA Natural Resources Agency, Cal/EPA)

The Gap Fire Report, (Klamath Forest Alliance, EPIC)

California's Forests and Rangelands: 2010 Strategy Report, (CALFIRE Fire and Resource Assessment Program, 2010)

H.R. 1892, "Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018" Sec. 20101, Title 1 - California Fires Payson Roundup ([www.paysonroundup.com](http://www.paysonroundup.com)), "Congress finally passes 'fire borrowing' fix"

H.R. 1904 (16 U.S.C. 6501) Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003

H.R. 2862 - Wildfire Disaster Funding Act

H.R. 2613 - Forests Act of 2017

H.R. 2936 – Resilient Federal Forest Act of 2017-2018

Horse Creek Community Protection and Forest Restoration Project, USFS KNF 2017

Forest Management Solutions for Mitigating Climate Change in the United States, Robert W. Malmshemer, et al (<https://www.ntc.blm.gov/krc/uploads/399/Forest%20Management%20Solutions%20for%20Mitigating%20Climate%20Change.pdf>)