



Statement by Senator Dianne Feinstein on Fire Prevention Funding for California  
May 5, 2004

“While firefighters continue to battle wildfires that have consumed more than 20,000 acres in Southern California in what may become one of our State’s worst fire seasons, the U.S. Department of Agriculture today informed me that they have agreed to make administrative changes that will break through a logjam in getting desperately needed fire prevention dollars to California.

Yesterday, I urged Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman to do everything she could to help address the emergency situation in California. Today, she notified me that the Department was going to waive the 25 percent local cost-share requirements under the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s Emergency Watershed Protection Program. This is a significant action by the Secretary and her rapid response is greatly appreciated.

This will help get \$120 million, which has already been appropriated, to work to remove hazardous fuels on private lands in San Bernardino, San Diego, and Riverside Counties more quickly. I also understand the Department is seeking ways to reduce bottlenecks to further expedite the release of funds.

Additionally, the Department has agreed to reduce the local cost-share requirements for U.S. Forest Service funding to remove hazardous fuels on private lands from 50 percent to 25 percent, which is the minimum permissible cost-share.

We absolutely need to get these funds to work as quickly as possible in order to protect our communities, which face a very significant threat this fire season.

I noted yesterday that I was deeply concerned that the money appropriated by Congress last year to confront the fire threat is not making its way to the communities that need funding most. Last year, Congress appropriated \$240 million specifically to remove dead and dying trees in Southern California. This includes:

- \$150 million for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (part of USDA), \$120 million of which was designated for removal of trees killed by drought and bark beetle and erosion control; and
- \$90 million for a U.S. Forest Service program to remove dead and dying trees from federal lands and nearby private land.

I understand that of the \$120 million for the Natural Resources Conservation Service designated for tree removal in San Bernardino, Riverside, and San Diego Counties, none of the money

had been used so far and only \$10 million will be spent in 2004. An additional \$110 million was scheduled to be spent from 2005 to 2007.

Additionally, the U.S. Forest Service indicated that only \$4.6 million out of \$47.9 million has been obligated for fuel reduction projects on state and private land, and \$8.25 million out of \$44.3 million for projects primarily on federal land.

Southern California faces a serious fire emergency, and thousands of homes and businesses could go up in smoke in a major firestorm, like the ones that occurred last summer. In some Southern California forests, up to 80 percent of trees are dead or dying as a result of bark beetle damage. This represents a major threat, which needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service office indicated that the primary cause of this delay is the difficulty of obtaining a cost-share match from local counties. So today's decision by the Agriculture Department will help speed these important projects along."

###