

GOLDEN TOGETHER



**Rescue, Reform, Rebuild: Practical Ideas
for Emerging from LA's Wildfire Disaster**

Foreword

One of the most tragic aspects of Los Angeles' 2025 wildfire disaster is that so much of it could and should have been prevented. From the well-documented short term failures in preparation and response, to the less visible but even more significant long-term policy failures that helped bring us to this point, the human suffering and economic cost of this catastrophe will be way higher than it needed to be. We can and must do better in the future.

We need common sense policies and competent government, and it is in that spirit that we have prepared this short paper. It is by no means a comprehensive analysis, or list of recommendations. It is the product of many urgent conversations with our Advisory Board and a wide range of experienced leaders in business, local and state government, fire prevention and firefighting, and especially with those who have been directly affected by the wildfires.

Our framework is RESCUE, REFORM and REBUILD: how we can help people right now; how we can improve our policies and practices to minimize risk and destruction in the future; how we can rebuild Los Angeles with urgency, energy and ambition - especially in light of the fact that in 2026 Los Angeles will host the Superbowl and the World Cup, and in 2028 the Olympic Games.

I am hugely grateful to everyone who helped prepare this paper in the midst of the wildfire crisis and at such short notice, especially Golden Together Advisory Board members Gloria Romero, Erika Guerrero and Soledad Usura as well as Tim McLelland, Joey Venti, Steve Eggert, Dan Kolkey and Pastor Jack Hibbs who generously provided insight and ideas. Special thanks to Governor Pete Wilson who provided me with his unique insights from his widely-praised leadership after the 1994 Northridge earthquake. We are also indebted to the many industry experts and wildlife biologists who shared their research expertise, including Dan Dunmoyer, Steve Craig, Mike Baker, Andrew Ball, Danny Haber, Stephen Byrd, Steven Brink, Lisa Perry, Andrea Howell, John Mount, Eric Carleson, and George Gentry.

My appreciation also to California Policy Center senior fellow Edward Ring who is the lead author on this and all our policy papers. I cannot overstate my appreciation for Ed's policy expertise, and his ability to produce clear and compelling writing that tells the story of what has gone wrong in California and how we can put it right together. I would not be able to do any of this without him.

Steve Hilton

Founder, Golden Together
California, January 2025

Wildfires are making California unlivable; it doesn't have to be this way. These are ideas to do better - together.

Superfires, a predictable problem

California has been plagued with superfires for many years but nothing has approached the scale of the ongoing disaster that has befallen the people of Los Angeles. And while nothing can prevent fire from spreading when the Santa Ana winds periodically blow gusts of hot desert air through the mountains and canyons and into the Los Angeles Basin, there are many things we could have done to prevent those fires from turning into the cataclysm we're currently experiencing.

People are demanding answers about what went wrong in the past. Our role at Golden Together, as a non-partisan policy organization, is to look to the future. Here we present specific, tangible suggestions for how we can:

- Help people affected by this disaster right now;
- Reform our policies and processes around fire prevention, fire-fighting, forest management, brush clearance and water;
- Rebuild Los Angeles and along with it the spirit and promise of California.

But to understand how we move forward, we need clarity about how we got here.

A path forward

Steps to mitigate wildfires – like **fire breaks** and **brush clears** – are well known but for years have been ignored. Instead of addressing immediate causes and hazards, policy has prioritized the “climate crisis” and failed to take common sense, practical steps to solve the problem. Ironically, the carbon emissions from out-of-control wildfires dwarf emissions reductions from ‘climate’ policies. This reality, as well as a detailed policy plan for better forest management, is laid out in an [earlier Golden Together report](#).

Exacerbating the problem, flawed policies that politicians enacted were supported by special interests who benefited from the subsidies and mandates that were bestowed upon them after every big fire. There were also sensible policies that failed to be implemented due to overwhelming bureaucratic obstruction and extreme environmentalism that was not challenged in any meaningful way.

For example, after the devastating wildfires of 2020, the governor of California issued an executive order banning by 2035 any sales of new cars that weren't EVs. This edict did nothing to prepare for or help curb wildfires.

Wildfires can't be eliminated completely but there are basic policy changes that will reduce their severity. While implementation of these reforms requires courage and leadership, they can be summarized in three words: **manage fuel load**. Specifically: deregulate the process whereby public and private land managers can do controlled burns, thin vegetation, clear brush, establish fire breaks, graze goats, cattle, and other herbivores, and harvest marketable timber.

We must invest more aggressively in, and remove bureaucratic obstacles to, **making power lines fire-safe**. This should include pruning and clearing foliage around power lines, insulating power lines, and where necessary, moving power lines underground in fire-prone neighborhoods.

We must also **harness technology** to transform our ability to detect fires early and extinguish them before they threaten to become dangerous.

At the same time, we must transform our approach to water in California. The narrative of "drought" is misleading and damaging. We have all the water supply we need in California, whether from rainfall, the Sierra snowpack or even the Pacific Ocean. We just need to **capture water, store it and get it to where it is needed**. We need to increase water allocations to California's urban areas and invest in a more robust system of water delivery so surges of water can be better sustained during firefighting efforts. A comprehensive plan is laid out in our Golden Together policy paper, [Water Abundance](#).

For far too long, the "climate crisis" has been the rhetorical bludgeon and a false excuse used to justify legislation and regulations that have increasingly been harmful to the environment. Mismanagement of our forests, wildlands and water is a prime and very tragic example of this.

Clearly, turning these long-term policy failures around will not be easy. But it needs to be done. That was true before the Los Angeles wildfires, and it is something that needs to be done for the wellbeing of our entire state, not just Los Angeles.

But these fires, and the enormous amount of concern they have rightly generated, have prompted the generation of many excellent, specific ideas for change.

Below we have gathered together many of these ideas, under three categories: **Rescue, Reform, Rebuild**. In the weeks and months ahead we will add to these and go deeper into the most promising ideas, based on the developing situation in Los Angeles and across California, and in the light of progress (or lack of it) in the local, state and federal response.

RESCUE

People are in crisis and need help now - families who have lost their homes, business owners who have lost their premises...they and their communities will need our help and support long after media attention has moved on. Here are some specific ideas that might help:

- Lift restrictions and wave inspections on emergency generators and out of state equipment for power generation where supply has been disrupted.
- Educate consumers who have insurance that they can receive Additional Living Expenses paid for by their insurer to at least address their immediate need for shelter (i.e a hotel versus a gym).
- The road facing people displaced by disasters of this kind can be a long and daunting one. A huge part of the problem is the fragmented nature of the services people need, from a wide range of organizations in the public and private sector. U.S. Digital Response has the resources and expertise to help design a people-centred “journey” - effectively a one-stop shop.
- In the short term, we also need to bring down barriers for allowing local faith-based and charitable organizations to lend assistance in the aftermath. Pastor Jack Hibbs of Calvary Chapel, Chino Hills, is joining with Golden Together to lead an effort to mobilize churches and other places of worship to help displaced families and support first responders.
- Insurance is a major source of anxiety. While we need long-term reform of our entire regulatory framework (see below), in the short term we propose requesting an “Insurance Advance” guarantee from the Federal Government (most appropriately delivered through FEMA) that would enable all payments to be received now, with the insurance companies reimbursed later.

REFORM

We must demand good governance in California. It is now obvious to everyone that we cannot let ideology be prioritized over common sense measures that will deliver the basic expectations we rightly have of government: to keep us safe and to provide in a reliable, affordable manner the fundamental services we rely on. Here are some priorities for reform:

- Increase water deliveries to Southern California cities and invest in more water storage and distribution infrastructure including back-up energy systems for getting water to fire hydrants.
- Keep up annual safety inspections of wildland areas surrounding neighborhoods.
- Establish a thorough system of fire breaks and fire roads, and ensure regular and thorough brush clearance programs are set up and carried out.
- Permit private property owners to clear brush and create fire breaks on adjacent public land if public agencies fail to do so, without requiring multi-year CEQA permit processes.
- More aggressively clear around transmission lines, including suspending CEQA requirements for power line maintenance, insulation and undergrounding.

- Clear homeless encampments and other sources of ignitions that could be prevented.
- Include wildfires when measuring the state's progress in reducing carbon emissions. This would incentivize greater investment in this area over other less effective environmental policies.
- Change state and local firefighting and forestry procurement rules to accept proposals that include novel, technology-driven firefighting and fire prevention tools and solutions.
- In addition to these specific recommendations we would highlight the comprehensive reform programs outlined in our Golden Together policy reports [Modern Forest Management](#) and [Water Abundance](#).
- Modernize and enhance fire detection and firefighting tools: To that end, we propose the **creation of a new 'California Fire Force'** specifically focused on harnessing technology - for example in the form of AI-enabled drones and autonomous fire-fighting equipment that can be pre-deployed in fire-prone areas. This is explored in more detail below.

REBUILD

We must ensure that all barriers in the way of rapid rebuilding - in Los Angeles and beyond - are removed. California is the most over-regulated, over-legislated and over-litigated state in America. Just as we must clear the brush and undergrowth that can fuel fires, we need to **clear away the bureaucracy that fuels stagnation and sclerosis.**

Counter-productive environmental and labor regulations, bureaucratized permitting and inspection processes, all of this and more need urgent and drastic reform. We were pleased to see some of these measures included in Governor Newsom's Executive Order of January 12th 2025. But we can go further, faster:

- Use emergency powers to create incentives-based contracts for site clearance and clean-up in fire-ravaged areas. The model should be the approach taken by Governor Wilson after the 1994 Northridge Earthquake. Among other achievements this enabled the Santa Monica freeway to be rebuilt in 66 days.
- Suspend CEQA for all rebuilding of homes and infrastructure. Remove all building code requirements that were put in place since the original home was built.
- Expedited permitting. No fees or regulation to rebuild the same floor plan. Set up 'Instant Permit and Plan Check' centres in neighborhoods affected by fires - for example in grocery stores, libraries and other prominent community locations.
- Suspend labor regulations, including union labor 'closed shop' agreements, that will undermine other deregulatory efforts by increasing cost and delaying pace of construction.
- Allow insurance companies to pass reinsurance costs to clients, deregulate insurance industry and get admitted insurance companies back in the market. The growth of the FAIR Plan is clear proof that our insurance system is in shambles. With a FAIR Plan policy you pay twice as much

for insurance for half the coverage. The insurance crisis is self-inflicted and requires new leadership to address it.

- Support rapid passage of legislation (AB 226) to address the very limited California's FAIR Plan which will be insolvent much more quickly without it. The legislature failed to pass this needed reform last year due to petty politics (AB 2996).
- Permit out-of-state insurance companies to enter and compete in the California market.
- Invest in decentralized water storage to maintain water supplies during major fires including underground cisterns and hillside tanks in fire-prone areas.
- Make use of newly available water dispersed fire resistant coatings for organic matter. When the coating is cured it is clear and not visible. It offers self-extinguishing and flame propagation resistance to organic matter (i.e. wood). This can be applied as fireblock propagation barriers, or around critical areas.
- Explore 'Manhattan Project' for mass timber. Mass timber is the most important development in construction materials since concrete. It is just as fire-resistant as concrete, but vastly more sustainable. This would also help revive California's dying timber industry and support better forest management in the Sierras.

CALIFORNIA FIRE FORCE

This is a sample of ideas from the Golden Together network. They give a sense of what might be possible. We have established a 'Fire Force Development Team', led by Silicon Valley entrepreneur and investor Vishal Verna, to bring together technologists, engineers and investors to create a model for the creation and implementation of the world's most innovative operation for the rapid detection and extinguishing of potentially dangerous fires.

- Machine learning solar powered forest robots can clear and recover dry, organic plant litter to reduce the hazard to fire crews and reduce labor costs. Each robot can be equipped with a Starlink modem to enable telemetry and human remote-operation in the event of a situation which faults its machine algorithm. That human choice is then part of its new learning algorithm, eventually needing no human inputs to clear brush and dropped limbs. It either chips them into mulch on location, or drags them to an area with fire road access to accumulate for pickup. Robots move to sunny locations during the day to charge and then work through the night in the forested areas. By removing the dry combustible organics from the forest floor, the rate fires spread and the ability to fight them is improved.
- Employ intelligent fire line cutting to correlate with applicable California wind speeds; higher wind speed permits embers to travel higher and further than current fire breaks. Fire breaks that the fire can easily jump only serve decorative function.
- Use remote control planes and drones with thermal cameras to fly grid patterns searching to spot heat signatures for early detection. Starlink communication satellites may be able to add hardware to accomplish this scanning continuously. This method requires fast and effective

response time of firefighting aircraft, as the fire can be extinguished while it's still small enough for aircraft to be effective.

- Use intumescent thermal barrier paints on the sides of flammable structures to enable fire propagation resilience. The paints are water based, not-environmentally hazardous, inexpensive, and require no additional effort to apply than conventional re-painting. This can prevent or greatly slow the rate of structure-to-structure fire propagation.
- Install wireless, solar panel-equipped ground soil humidity sensors in a grid array through fire-prone forest or field regions (watch how many consecutive dry days are experienced; burn tests can be completed to evaluate the risks and the timing of preventative action) enable monitoring of tinder box-like conditions with an algorithm to determine flammability risk. These areas could be then irrigated and/or coated with fire resisting material to reduce risk.
- Promotion of effective prefabricated non-toxic fire suppression materials through tax breaks, credits or other means.
- For every mountain peak and topologically lightning prone area, install lightning rod towers designed with electrostatic break outs optimized to attract potential local charge energy to be safely dissipated into the grounded flame and heat resilient tower. Real world electrostatic gradients across forests or other flammable areas can be mapped by a drone carried array during storm conditions to validate optimal tower location effectiveness.
- LIDAR scanning technology, which can detect particles typically found in wood smoke, is also able to measure continuous attenuation and reflection of its beam in the air to assess smoke concentration. This system could potentially identify smoldering fires in forests during their early stages, enabling rapid detection and response before they spread.

