

# The Professional Foresters Law and the role of the REGISTERED PROFESSIONAL FORESTER in Managing California's Forests



**June 22, 2020**

**A public informational statement by the Professional Foresters Examining Committee (PFEC)**

**PURPOSE** - This document is written for the general public by the Professional Foresters Examining Committee. Its purpose is to explain the role of Registered Professional Foresters in the context of California's lands, laws, and professional licensing requirements. The Professional Foresters Examining Committee was created under law by the California State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection to take charge of the registration, examination, and the licensing of Registered Professional Foresters. The Board of Forestry and Fire Protection is a Governor-appointed body within the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection with diverse powers and responsibilities that are spelled out in law. Created in 1885, it was the first such body in the nation. The Board is responsible for developing the general forest policy of the state, for determining the guidance policies of the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, and for representing the State's interest in the management of non-federal as well as federal forest land in California.

## **California's Forests**

Trees are just one element of a forest. A forest is a tree dominated ecosystem characterized by extensive tree cover with variable density that usually consists of forests with varying characteristics such as species composition, stand structure and age class. The forest ecosystem also includes the associated vegetation, soil, water, plants, fish, wildlife and grazing animals. People and their structures are an integral part of many California forests. Forests in California are commonly managed to sustain single or diverse products or special values and include multiple types such as industrial, non-industrial, public, urban, conservation as well as parks and wilderness.

California possesses vast and valuable forest resources. The State ranks second in the Nation in total forest land. It has a wide range of climates, elevations, slopes, geological features, and vegetation conditions, so its forest resources are naturally quite diverse as well as very precious. The variety is manifested in the large stands of timber, including 21 species of hardwoods and conifers that are native only to California, as well as in the thousands of species of plants, fish, and wildlife that inhabit these forested landscapes.

California's forested landscape encompass approximately 33,000,000 acres of the State, and include commercial timberland, the urban-rural interface, parks, wilderness, chaparral, and oak woodland.

Table I.1: Statewide Area of Major Vegetation Type by Owner Group (Acres in Thousands)						
Major Vegetation Type	Private	USFS	BLM	NPS	Other Public	Total <sup>1</sup>
<b>Forestland</b>						
Conifer Forest	6,532	10,334	362	1,082	554	18,865
Hardwood Forest	2,307	1,270	193	141	206	4,116
<b>Forest and Rangeland</b>						
Conifer Woodland	480	861	482	366	145	2,335
Hardwood Woodland	4,459	287	164	21	597	5,527
<b>Rangeland<sup>2</sup></b>						
Herbaceous <sup>3</sup>	9,260	513	401	61	870	11,105
Desert	3,411	185	10,382	4,807	4,193	22,977
Shrub	4,725	6,076	2,365	351	1,391	14,908
<b>Total Forest and Rangeland</b>	<b>31,174</b>	<b>19,526</b>	<b>14,349</b>	<b>6,829</b>	<b>7,956</b>	<b>79,833</b>
<b>Other</b>						
Agriculture	10,752	2	26	0	234	11,013
Barren/Other	472	925	629	645	381	3,052
Urban	4,512	13	58	5	233	4,822
Water <sup>4</sup>						1,841
<b>Total (Forest, Range, Other)<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>46,910</b>	<b>20,466</b>	<b>15,062</b>	<b>7,479</b>	<b>8,804</b>	<b>100,561</b>

<sup>1</sup> Totals may not add up due to rounding.  
<sup>2</sup> Rangeland refers to "primary" rangeland, and does not include conifer forest, which has rangeland forage potential and is often grazed by livestock  
<sup>3</sup> Includes wetlands  
<sup>4</sup> Areas classified as water are not assigned an ownership  
<sup>5</sup> These acreages are based on digital map-based data, and are somewhat different than those used throughout this Assessment from the Forest Service's Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) data, which are derived using a sample-based system

Data Sources: Vegetation, FRAP, v15\_1; Ownership, FRAP, v15\_1.

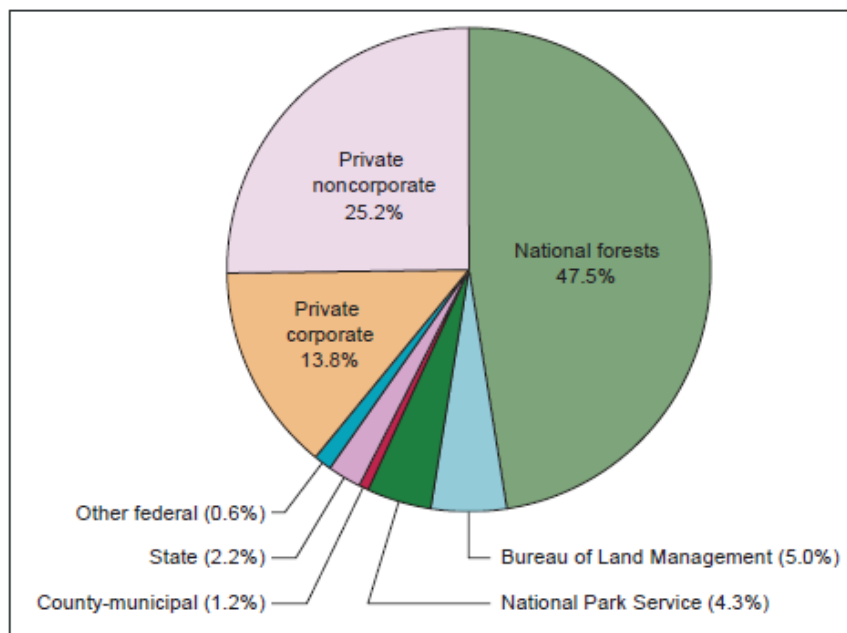


Figure 22—Percentage of forest land by owner group in California, 2001–2010.

Figure 22 - Data Sources: California's Forest Resources: Forest Inventory and Analysis, 2001–2010, PNW-GTR-913

Almost a third of California is forested. Forest land is defined as land that is at least 10 percent stocked by forest trees of any size, or land formerly having such tree cover and not currently developed for a non-forest use.

Over 47% of these lands are administered by the federal government as National Forests, 39% are under private ownership, with the remainder, approximately 13%, are administered by the State and various public agencies.

From these acres come nearly all the State's fresh water, about 20% of the lumber and plywood used in California, extensive range for cattle and sheep, invaluable habitat for game and wildlife, and some of the most spectacularly beautiful scenery and recreational opportunities to be found anywhere. Because of the increasing demands being placed on California's forest resources, a careful balance must be kept between human uses and the environment in order to sustain its natural wealth. This sustainability can only be achieved through the proper application of forestry principles and sound natural resource management practices.

## **FORESTRY**

Forestry refers to the science and practice of managing forested landscapes and the treatment of the forest cover in general, and includes, among other things, the application of scientific knowledge and forestry principles in the fields of fuels management and forest protection, timber growing and utilization, forest inventories, forest economics, forest valuation and finance, and the evaluation and mitigation of impacts from forestry activities on watershed and scenic values.

Registered Professional Foresters are charged with the care and management of California's forests. Forests can provide a wide range of renewable commodities provided that proper management is taken.

## **THE REGISTERED PROFESSIONAL FORESTER**

A Registered Professional Forester (RPF) is a person knowledgeable in a wide range of studies such as biology, ecology, entomology, geology, hydrology, dendrology, silviculture, engineering, business administration, forest economics, and other natural resource subjects. RPFs use their well-rounded education and experience to maintain the sustainability of forest resources like timber, forage, wildlife, water, and outdoor recreation to meet the needs of the people while protecting the biological integrity and quality of the forest environment.

RPFs perform a wide variety of activities. RPFs organize and direct systems of control for forest fires, insect pests, and tree diseases. They determine the environmental impacts of management decisions and design effective mitigation measures to minimize or eliminate those impacts. They plan for and maintain wildlife habitat. They prescribe thinning for immature stand of trees and removal of defective trees for stand improvement. They plan for sustainable harvest of forests and for the reforestation of new stands. RPFs measure the volume of standing timber, appraise market value, plan harvests, and administer the sale of the forest products.

Foresters also help plan for recreational uses of the forest including the maintenance of its natural beauty. They are called upon to revegetate, enhance, or restore areas impacted by wildfire. In addition, Registered Professional Foresters must be well-versed in federal, state, and local laws affecting forestry practices in California in order to administer them properly.

In order for a professional forester to fulfill their responsibilities with regard to a particular activity on a site, the professional forester may need to utilize the services of other qualified experts, such as archaeologists, botanists, civil engineers, ecologists, fisheries biologists, geologists, hydrologists, land surveyors, landscape architects, range scientists, soil scientists, or wildlife biologists.

Because forestry activities can have a significant impact upon the ecological condition of California's forests and the quality of the forest environment, the State legislature enacted the Professional Foresters Law in 1972, which provides for the licensing of professional foresters and Certified Specialists.

### **PROFESSIONAL FORESTERS LAW OF 1972**

California's Professional Foresters Law (PFL) became effective on January 1, 1973. The PFL outlines the guiding principles and responsibilities of Registered Professional Foresters and provides the State with vital professionals who are knowledgeable in developing and carrying out forest management plans. The law requires all persons who wish to call themselves "professional foresters" or to act in the capacity thereof, to register and become licensed.

With the passage of the PFL, the Legislature declared the existence of a public interest in the management and treatment of the forest resources and timberlands in California and regulates all persons who practice the profession of forestry. The intent of the Law is to provide a source of forest management experts--knowledgeable, trained, experienced and skilled in the scientific fields relating to forestry.

The minimum qualifications for registration as a professional forester include:

[PRC §769]. *Qualifications.*

*An applicant shall meet all of the following qualifications:*

*(a) Be of good moral character and have a good reputation for honesty and integrity.*

*(b) Furnish evidence of having completed seven years of experience in forestry work. Possession of a degree of bachelor of science, or equivalent degree as determined by the board, with a major in forestry, shall be deemed equivalent to four years of experience in the actual practice of forestry work. At least three of the seven years of experience shall include having charge of forestry work, or forestry work under the supervision of a person registered, or qualified for, but exempt from, registration under the provision of this article. Work completed prior to July 1, 1973, shall qualify if it was under the supervision of a qualified forester, as defined in Section 754. The award of a master of forestry degree shall be acceptable as evidence of one year of such qualifying experience.*

*(c) Has successfully completed such examination or examinations as are prescribed by the board.*

The Professional Foresters Law also provides for certification in particular fields [PRC §762]. A similar process to becoming a Registered Professional Forester applies to becoming a Certified Specialist, but the test is more specific to the field of specialization. Currently, the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection has established only one specialty, that of the Certified Rangeland Manager [Title 14 CCR, Chapter 10, Article 4, § 1651].

## RESPONSIBILITIES:

Being a Registered Professional Forester or Certified Specialist carries with it many responsibilities. The term "Registered Professional Forester" is defined in the Professional Foresters Law as:

*"...a person who, by reason of his or her knowledge of the natural sciences, mathematics, and the principles of forestry, acquired by forestry education and experience, performs services, including, but not limited to, consultation, investigation, evaluation, planning or responsible supervision of forestry activities when [such] professional services require the application of forestry principles and techniques."* [PRC §752]

One of an RPF's key concerns in the practice of forestry is the protection of all forest resources. Whether a public or private forester, this requires a broad understanding of many different fields including: *"...air and water pollution, the preservation of scenic beauty, the protection of watersheds by flood and soil erosion control, the production and increased yield of natural resources, including timber, forage, wildlife, and water, and outdoor recreation, to meet the needs of the people"* [PRC §751].

In addition, foresters manage for benefits of forests relative to a changing climate.

Consequently, it is necessary that RPFs keep current of professional matters, techniques and equipment, their uses and limitations, and applicable laws and regulations.

In a Memorandum of Understanding between the PFEC, professional societies, and universities with forestry or forestry-related programs, it was agreed upon that a concerted effort be made to raise the visible participation of forestry professionals in continuing education programs through voluntary incentives and recognition. The Society of American Foresters and The Association of Consulting Foresters have a voluntary tracking system to assist foresters in the documentation of their continuing education activities.

Before making planning or management recommendations, Registered Professional Foresters must learn the physical characteristics of the site or area, its soils, hydrology, vegetation, silvicultural characteristics, cultural features, wildlife and their habitat requirements, its land use zoning, and its economic realities. For most timber operations, the Forest Practice Rules require that an RPF is retained to provide advice to the Licensed Timber Operator (LTO) and timberland owner during active timber operations.

RPFs must advise and educate clients or employers about environmentally and economically sound management options for their properties. They must take into consideration impacts on and off the site when formulating and executing plans for forestry operations, and clearly point out to clients or employers possible conflicts which might arise from such activities.

Particular attention should be given to situations which may result in substantial adverse environmental impacts, and justification for any substantial adverse impacts should be clearly established. RPFs must consider and, to the extent practicable, avoid or mitigate consequences of plans and actions that may impact adjoining land ownerships. Timber harvesting plans or other land-use management plans must be based on the best available site information, including a site inspection.

Registered Professional Foresters must be thorough and accurate. An RPF must provide an adequate level of supervision over professional and technician subordinates to assure acceptable

standards of performance. The Registered Professional Forester assumes responsibility for all professional work and documents that the forester prepared or supervised by affixing his or her signature and license number. Lastly, the RPF should clearly communicate the needs and benefits of good forestry to the general public.

### **DISCIPLINARY ACTION:**

Should the RPF or Certified Specialist fail to meet the requirements of the law and regulation, the individual may be subject to disciplinary action. The grounds for disciplinary action which are delineated in the Professional Foresters Law include:

*a) "Has been convicted of a felony substantially related to the qualifications, functions, or duties of Registered Professional Forester." b) "Has been found guilty by the Board of any deceit, misrepresentation, fraud, material misstatement of fact, incompetence, or gross negligence in his or her practice." c) "Has been guilty of any fraud or deceit in obtaining his or her registration or certification." d) "Aids or abets any person in the violation of any provision of" the Professional Foresters Law. e) "Fails in any material respect to comply with the provisions of" the Professional Foresters Law. [PRC §778]*

A written complaint may be filed by any person with the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection regarding professional conduct of a Registered Professional Forester or Certified Specialist. The Executive Officer must verify the accusation under Professional Foresters Law before an investigation may take place. The Board may also, of its own accord, cause an inquiry to be conducted. The Board may suspend or revoke the license, issue a reprimand, or exonerate the individual. In regard to disciplinary actions, the Board has clearly stated that *"[t]he primary importance [in determining disciplinary action] is the adverse effect the Registered Professional Forester's actions had, or will continue to have, on the protection of the public interest" [14 CCR §1612.1].*

### **PROFESSIONAL ETHICS:**

Registered Professional Foresters are responsible for their own professional behavior and must, therefore, conduct themselves in a prudent manner to retain public confidence. They must not only meet the expected high standards of performance but must also function within the professional community's generally accepted code of ethics.

One of the most important duties imposed by professional ethics is the RPF's concurrent responsibility to the public and to the client or employer. Both the public's interest and the employer's carry significance and must be considered.

Prudent professional practice dictates that Registered Professional Foresters should not make forest management decisions at the expense of the public trust nor of the employer, but instead base judgments on sound forestry principles consistent with environmental laws.

Prudent practice also demands that Registered Professional Foresters recommend advice be obtained on possible questions of interpretation or conflict; and further that they inform their employers or clients of anticipated consequences if laws, regulations, or scientific principles are disregarded.

Registered Professional Foresters should represent and uphold the employer's or client's interests in all matters entrusted to them, including maintenance of confidentiality. They must make potential conflicts of interest known to the parties concerned and have them resolved, and they should accept

no compensation from more than one party for the same services unless the parties involved have given consent.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL LAWS PERTAINING TO FORESTRY IN CALIFORNIA**

### **FEDERAL ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATION:**

Four of the most important federal environmental laws that govern forest practices in California are the Clean Water Act (CWA), the Federal Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA), the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA).

The **Clean Water Act** ([Clean Water Act](#)) establishes the basic structure for regulating discharges of pollutants into the waters of the United States and regulating quality standards for surface waters. The basis of the CWA was enacted in 1948 and was called the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, but the Act was significantly reorganized and expanded in 1972. "Clean Water Act" became the Act's common name with amendments in 1972. The Act ensures regulatory systems are in place to a process to (i) identify, if appropriate, agriculturally and silviculturally related nonpoint sources of [pollution](#), including return flows from irrigated agriculture, and their cumulative effects, runoff from manure disposal areas, and from land used for livestock and crop production, and (ii) set forth procedures and methods (including land use requirements) to control to the extent feasible such sources; [33 U.S.C. §1288]. Nonpoint sources (NPS) of pollution generally results from land runoff, precipitation, atmospheric deposition, drainage, seepage or hydrologic modification. NPS pollution, unlike pollution from industrial and sewage treatment plants, comes from many diffuse sources. NPS pollution is caused by rainfall or snowmelt moving over and through the ground. As the runoff moves, it picks up and carries away natural and human-made pollutants, finally depositing them into lakes, rivers, wetlands, coastal waters and ground waters. In California, the State Water Quality Control Board has been assigned by the federal government to implement the Clean Water Act. These authorities are further delegated to 9 Regional waterboards that regulate NPS's under their Basin Plans, governed by the authority granted by the CA legislature, and contained in the Porter-Cologne Act.

The **Endangered Species Act's** ([ESA](#)) purpose is to provide programs to recover and conserve threatened and endangered species [16 U.S.C. §1531(b)]. The Act prohibits the "taking" of a threatened or endangered species via harm and/or harassment, unless authorized by a Habitat Conservation Plan. plans developed and administered by the Secretary of the Interior.

Other examples of federal laws affecting the management of federal lands and federal actions in California are the **National Environmental Policy Act** ([NEPA](#)) and the **National Forest Management Act** ([NFMA](#)). NEPA requires that federal agencies evaluate all activities which may have significant consequences on the environment. This Act further requires that an environmental assessment regarding the project's repercussions on its surroundings be made available to other agencies and to the public. Land-management plans for national forests must, therefore, include to enable the Forest Service to mitigate any adverse effects on the environment.

NFMA mandates that national forest plans must "provide for the diversity of plant and animal communities based on the suitability and capability of the specific land area . . . [16 U.S.C. §1604]. This was interpreted by the Forest Service regulations to mean that "[f]ish and wildlife habitat shall be managed to maintain viable populations of existing native and desired nonnative vertebrate species in the planning area" [36 C.F.R. §219.19].



## STATE ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATION:

In general, federal laws take precedence over state and local laws. They may, however, designate state or local agencies to achieve certain national goals. In addition, states may adopt laws to carry out federal government mandates. A prime example of this in California is the **Porter-Cologne Act of 1969** ([Porter-Cologne](#)) which allows the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) to regulate the water quality control of the state as directed by the requirements of the federal Clean Water Act. Timber operations and other forestry practices that may affect water quality are accordingly subject to the SWRCB and the Regional Water Quality Control Board oversight.

States also enact laws to protect their specific interests. The **California Endangered Species Act** (CESA), Fish and Game Code, Chapter 1.5 (commencing with Section 2050) of Division 3, modeled after the Federal Endangered Species Act, provides protection to California species that are not covered by its the ESA. It makes the conservation, protection, restoration, and the enhancement of any threatened or endangered species and their habitat a policy of the State [Cal. Fish and Game Code §2052]. CESA has added animals, mostly native to California, to its threatened and endangered species list, that are not included in the federal ESA. Conservation, according to both federal and state law, is defined to be the use of all methods and procedures "necessary to bring any endangered . . . or threatened species to the point at which the measures provided [by the acts] are no longer necessary" [U.S.C. §1532(3); 50 C.F.R. §424.02(c); Cal. Fish and Game Code §2061]. Endangered or threatened plants are also covered under Fish and Game Code under the provisions of the Native Plant Protection Act of 1977. However, this act does not apply to timber operations conducted under the FPA.

The beneficial uses of water and aquatic habitat are additionally protected by FGC 1600, which requires individuals planning to substantially affect the bed or bank of a watercourse to acquire a Lake and Streambed Alteration agreement with the CDFW.

The **California Environmental Quality Act of 1973** ([CEQA](#)) is another state law with a complement in the federal government's NEPA. While NEPA primarily covers the federal lands and federal actions in California, CEQA applies to all state and private properties. Like NEPA, CEQA requires that state and local government agencies prepare an environmental assessment before undertaking or issuing a permit for any project with possible environmental repercussions. CEQA's environmental assessment is the State's analogue to NEPA's.

In addition to the environmental assessment requirement, CEQA dictates that for projects which might have a significant adverse impact on the environment, the agency must evaluate feasible alternatives to reduce those potential adverse impacts to where they are no longer significant; or if harmful effects should be unavoidable, provide a justification of overriding consideration.

The **Z'berg-Nejedly Forest Practice Act of 1973** ([FPA](#)) goes further in regulating private forestry practices. The FPA governs the harvest of non-federal timberlands in California. The Act, in conjunction with the Professional Foresters Law, was established to address the public's growing concern over timber harvesting.

To accomplish its goals the FPA includes certain provisions such as the requirement that all persons who harvest timber obtain an annual timber operator's license from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE). A timber harvest plan (THP, NTMP, WFMP , exemptions/emergencies) must also be submitted to the Director of CDF for review and approval/acceptance prior



to harvesting timber. Moreover, the Forest Practice Act requires the preparation of Plan to be done by Registered Professional Foresters (RPF) to ensure that the plans are drafted by qualified persons.

In 1979, the Secretary of the Resources Agency certified the timber harvest plan process in the Forest Practice Act to be the "functional equivalent" of CEQA's environmental assessment process. Thus, the FPA was exempted from the environmental impact report preparation requirement of CEQA. Following harvest, the Act orders that areas be restocked according to proper standards.

Under the authority of the FPA, the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection has adopted, reviewed, and changed as needed rules and regulations to implement its mandate to sustain forest productivity while protecting the forest environment. The rules contain more specific guidelines concerning:

- the preparation, review, appeal, and enforcement of THPs
- silvicultural systems and regeneration methods
- harvesting practices and erosion control
- site preparation
- watercourse and lake protection
- sensitive watershed designation
- hazard reduction (which includes fire safety measures)
- forest insect and disease protection practices
- wildlife protection (including sensitive, threatened and endangered species)
- cumulative effects assessment
- late successional forest stands
- maximum sustained production of high quality timber
- long-term sustained yield plans
- special rules for Coastal Commission areas
- archeological and historical resource preservation
- the registration of professional foresters and forestry-related specialists

The extent to which the public has confidence in the forestry profession rests with the integrity of each Registered Professional Forester and with that forester's performance in working to protect and wisely utilize the state's forest resources. The responsibility for the actions of the individual Registered Professional Forester lies with that individual. Because foresters are accountable to the public, whether it is the employer or the general public, it is imperative that the RPF comply with applicable laws and regulations and assist their clients to do likewise.

For further information regarding forestry practices in California and the registration of professional foresters, please contact the State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection at the following address:

**Dan Stapleton, RPF #2707, Executive Officer, Professional Foresters Registration**  
**California State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection,**  
**P.O. Box 944246 Sacramento, CA 94244-2460.**  
**Office (916) 653-8031, Cellular (916) 767-2140, Fax (916) 653-0989**  
[dan.stapleton@bof.ca.gov](mailto:dan.stapleton@bof.ca.gov)

<https://bof.fire.ca.gov/projects-and-programs/professional-foresters-registration/>