

California's Next Major Wildfire Will Be Worse if CARB's ZEV Rules Go Unchanged

By Jon Barrett

When the Park Fire ignited on July 24, 2024, it spread rapidly and ultimately burned 429,000 acres, destroyed or damaged hundreds of structures, and became California's largest wildfire that year. Bad as it was, it would have been worse if a pending mandate for public agencies to use only zero-emission vehicles (ZEVs) had already been in effect. We need the California Air Resources Board (CARB) to amend its regulations and provide exemptions for support vehicles critical to firefighting. It's truly a matter of life and death.

In the months before the Park Fire, the Resource Conservation District of Tehama County (RCDTC) was implementing fuels reduction and vegetation management projects in and around the Mill Creek community. Utilizing CAL FIRE Fire Prevention Grant funding, RCDTC crews conducted mastication treatments throughout the area to reduce hazardous fuel loading and improve wildfire resilience.

Crews continued working even as the fire reached its third day. As it advanced toward Mill Creek, RCDTC personnel were forced to evacuate, but the fuels reduction work proved critical to the firefighting response. Firefighters were able to stage hose lines along masticated corridors and conduct back-burn operations within treated units, which proved instrumental in defending and ultimately saving the Mill Creek community.

The success of these projects demonstrated the value of proactive fuels management, interagency coordination, and local commitment to community protection. However, future work of this nature faces serious challenges under CARB's Advanced Clean Fleets regulation . If these rules had been in place in 2024, RCDTC would not have been able to complete the Mill Creek mastication project, and the additional losses could have been catastrophic.

Our District depends on diesel-powered trucks capable of hauling 15,000-pound mastication equipment into remote, mountainous terrain. Currently, no CARB-compliant vehicles exist on the market capable of meeting these operational demands – they simply lack the range or long-term reliability we need.

The requirement for electric or zero-emission heavy trucks in these remote environments also creates significant operational and safety risks. Many sites are far from power infrastructure, with no reliable charging capacity and limited communication access. A disabled or power-depleted vehicle in these rugged settings could create liability and safety hazards for workers, delay emergency responses, and increase the risks faced during fire season.

More importantly, without vast improvements to EV heavy-truck technology, there will never be infrastructure capable of supporting the work RCDTC must perform in remote settings such as Mill Creek, or in forestry environments where electrical infrastructure simply does not exist. Mandating that special districts and other local agencies transition to ZEV fleets—before the necessary technology has even been invented, let alone tested—is completely undoable and ignores the physical and operational realities of rural wildfire prevention.

CARB has opened a 15-day comment period on its ZEV mandate. However, there's no guarantee CARB is going to take meaningful action on comments and concerns from agencies like ours.

As an agency deeply committed to conservation and environmental stewardship, RCDTC fully supports California's long-term goals. However, the state's transition must be balanced with the realities of rural operations and the immediate need to prevent catastrophic wildfires. In the short term, that requires thoughtful implementation of CARB's rules and allowing common sense exemptions for vehicles essential to saving lives and property.

In a recent survey by the California Special Districts Association (CSDA), 75 percent of California voters agreed these exemptions were the right approach. Support was strong regardless of political affiliation - with at least 70 percent of Democrats, Republicans, and nonpartisan voters supporting an exemption for vehicles anticipated to respond to or assist in emergency situations.

Californians agree that the devastation, carbon emissions, and loss of life associated with large-scale fires far outweigh the limited emissions produced by essential heavy equipment used in wildfire prevention. Allowing flexibility, innovation, and realistic implementation timelines will help ensure carbon reduction efforts do not unintentionally undermine the very conservation and safety goals CARB seeks to achieve.

California is heading into a fire season shaped by low snowpack and extreme weather—conditions that have repeatedly led to catastrophic fires. This is not the moment to tie the hands of the very crews working to reduce that risk. The public should speak up now, during CARB's comment period, and demand realistic exemptions for critical equipment. Because once the next fire starts, it will be too late to wish we had gotten this right.

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