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June 24, 2020

The Honorable Jared Blumenfeld
Secretary, California Environmental Protection Agency
1001 I Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

Secretary Blumenfeld:

On Monday, June 22, a large fire moved rapidly through the dry Salinas Riverbed in the City of Paso Robles. It quickly jumped the riverbank, destroyed two homes, damaged nine other structures, and forced nearly one-third of the city's residents to evacuate. While the damage was bad, it could have been much, much worse. Were it not for the quick and heroic actions taken by our local and state firefighters, entire neighborhoods could have been engulfed in a matter of hours.

Their heroic actions, however, should not have been necessary.

The Salinas River runs through the heart of the city's downtown area and encompasses hundreds of acres – much of which is covered with trees, shrubs, and dry grass. In 2019 alone, more than 90 fires were started in this riverbed.

For a number of years, the City has attempted to work with the Central Coast Regional Water Board to mitigate the risk caused by the overgrowth within the Salinas Riverbed, which is the largest fire risk area in North San Luis Obispo County.

And for years, the City's efforts to work constructively with the board has been stymied. The board's staff seems unable, or refuses, to take seriously the threat posed to our residents' lives and property by the overgrowth conditions in the riverbed.

As a result of years of inaction, the City was compelled to declare a state of emergency last year in order to clear some of the brush after an active spring fire season in the riverbed. Inexcusably, in response to this desperate and last-ditch effort the City took to protect residents, the board threatened legal action if the city attempted to declare another emergency in 2020.

The board has also forbidden the City from using mechanized equipment in the riverbed. Instead, the board mandated the use of hand crews to clear brush – a method that is prohibitively expensive and wholly inadequate to complete the work necessary to reduce fire danger.

Furthermore, the board refuses to allow the City to enter the riverbed and start clearing brush until late June, which is far too late into the fire season by any reasonable standard. It should be noted that the

City itself requires private property owners to have brush cleared before June 1. So, while our private residents must abate fire hazards in time for fire season, the board prohibits the City from doing the same in the riverbed.

Each of these fires not only poses risk to life and property, but causes severe environmental damage and results in the release of greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere – an environmental consequence far graver than whatever environmental harm might be caused by clearing brush from a dry riverbed.

In order to protect the lives and property of our residents, we ask CalEPA and the Central Coast Regional Water Board to take the following actions within seven days:

1. Grant the city permission to use mechanized methods to clear areas of the Salinas Riverbed
2. Expedite review and processing of the city's application for a long-term maintenance plan (a plan that has already been reviewed and approved by both the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Army Corps of Engineers)
3. Recognize the city's Public Safety Director's findings that a lack of maintenance of vegetation in the Salinas Riverbed constitutes a threat to life and property and is an acceptable justification for declaration of local emergency and subsequent actions to protect the public

As we saw earlier this week, the board's total failure to act after years of requests by the city has resulted in an extremely dangerous and combustible situation that poses risk to tens of thousands of residents, businesses, and visitors. The board's inaction is totally irresponsible, borders on criminal and civil negligence, and will inevitably result in further catastrophic damage to the lives and property of local residents.

We implore you to prioritize the lives of the city's residents and allow Paso Robles to immediately implement critical, necessary, and responsible fire abatement measures within the Salinas Riverbed.

Sincerely,



Jordan Cunningham
Assemblyman, 35th District



John Peschong
1st District Supervisor, County of San Luis Obispo



Steve Martin
Mayor, City of Paso Robles

CC: Governor Gavin Newsom
Members, Central Coast Regional Water Board
Matthew T. Keeling, Executive Officer, Central Coast Regional Water Board