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June 14, 2022

Honorable Senator Dave Cortese
Senate Labor, Public Employment and Retirement Committee
1021 O Street, Rm 6740
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: OPPOSE – AB 1717 (Aguiar-Curry)

Honorable Senator Cortese,

On behalf of the Nevada County Board of Supervisors, I am writing to express our opposition to AB 1717 (Aguiar-Curry) that will expand the definition of “public works” for the purpose of the payment of prevailing wages, to also include fuel reduction work done under contract and paid for or in part by public funds performed as part of a fire mitigation project, including, but not limited to, residential chipping, rural fuel breaks, fire breaks, and vegetation management.

Over the past several years, California’s wildfire seasons have grown both longer and more severe each year, as climate change has exacerbated the decades-overdue need for better vegetation management and fuels treatment strategies around communities in the wildland urban interface (WUI). Over 75% of Nevada County residents are in high or very high fire hazard severity zones and depend on public funding for hazardous vegetation management activities. Funding mechanisms such as the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) are used to implement community fuels treatment and fire mitigation projects to safeguard their communities from wildfires.

The ability to utilize GGRF and other public dollars through programs like California Climate Investments has afforded rural local governments like Nevada County the ability to undertake such vital projects as clearing dead and dying trees from critical infrastructure and residential properties during California’s recent tree mortality epidemic, as well as completing community wildfire mitigation projects in concert with local fire prevention organizations to help safeguard residents from the impacts of devastating wildfires. The ability for Nevada County to maximize its efforts in reducing the risks of wildfire has never been more critical as outlined as one of our 2022 Priority Objectives to “Lead the community in all hazards planning, preparedness, response, and recovery with a focus on wildfire. Do this by focusing on improving countywide evacuation routes and safety, continuing to strengthen early alert and critical communication systems, partnering closely with residents in emergency preparedness, defensible space, home hardening, green waste disposal, and fire-safe land stewardship.”

As a fire-prone county we seek ways to maximize the ability to safeguard residents from the devastation of wildfires. Therefore, it seems ill-timed to introduce additional barriers to implementation of fire mitigation projects in communities that desperately need public funds to complete these projects – especially at a time when the State is reporting an unprecedented historical budget surplus. AB 1717 would increase the cost of crucial fire mitigation projects around communities and critical infrastructure by including these projects in the definition of

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“public works,” thus subjecting them to prevailing wage. AB 1717 would simply drive up costs of the scarce forest workforce currently in place, while shrinking the pace and scale of vegetation treatment projects on the ground, particularly in disadvantaged communities. Moreover, AB 1717 would potentially diminish the dollar during economic strenuous times when the state is not experiencing a huge budget surplus. General estimates show that costs would increase roughly by 30%, which translates into 30% less critical work being done. Therefore, for these reasons, we oppose AB 1717. Yet in recognition of the need to promote and support a sustainable forest management industry, we encourage the author and legislature to consider other opportunities that balance the future vitality of a new large scale emerging industry, including equitable pay across socio-economical and disadvantaged communities, with the need to maximize project efficiency and acres managed today. Simple solutions are not always the best way to solve complex programs, and AB 1717 will jeopardize our ability to mitigate the very real risks of public safety to our citizens today. We truly believe that through innovative solutions increased pay across the industry can occur without severely impacting the thousands of critical projects through the passage of AB 1717 in one blanket policy change.

Sincerely,

Susan Hoek
Board of Supervisors, Chair