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CA Parks Urged to Immediately Mobilize Forest Crews to Save Giant Sequoias in Calaveras Big Trees State Park

(ARNOLD, CA) – Calling the condition of Calaveras Big Trees State Park “dire”, the Calaveras Big Trees Association today called on the head of California’s state parks to immediately mobilize “a cavalry of forest crews” to rid the 6500-acre park of a massive build-up of dense, dry vegetation.

“As a result of decades of fire suppression followed by limited periodic controlled burning, there has been an excessive, unnatural accumulation of fuel over the years,” said Dr. Vida Kenk, President of the Calaveras Big Trees Association (CBTA). “It will surely devastate our precious giant sequoia groves in a catastrophic fire.”

The Association is the non-profit partner of Calaveras Big Trees State Park that raises funds to support the Park’s educational and interpretive programs.

Pointing to wildfires over the past 18 months that destroyed up to 19 percent of the total population of giant sequoias, all of which live in California, Dr. Kenk, said: “We must act now - not wait until spring or summer or beyond - to significantly reduce the fire accelerants in the Park if we want to save two of the last giant sequoia groves in the world untouched by fire – as well as our mountain resort communities around them.”

“Fire scientists say that what stopped the fires in their tracks in the Sequoia National Park and Calder fires near South Lake Tahoe was coming up to a healthy part of the forest where it had been carefully managed, thinned and all the dry vegetation removed. That’s a teaching lesson – and why it’s imperative the state act with urgency to use the next few months to get Calaveras Big Trees in fighting form.”

While the recent \$7 million state wildfire resilience fund allocation to DPR’s Central District for prescribed burns and fuel reduction over the next five years is a significant step, Dr. Kenk said the talented but small California State Park District fire planning staff does not have sufficient resources to prepare for rapid action at this time. “Our state no longer has a predictable ‘wildfire season’ – fires strike at any time.

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“In this area, wildfire is not a question of ‘if, but when’. Our beloved local state Park lacks year-around personnel, such as a park forester and a year-around crew, to manage the Park’s forest. If there were appropriate resources, the upcoming winter and spring months could be used to reduce wildfire intensity by thinning forest density, removing dead wood, limbing up large live trees, felling the smaller climbers that can spread fire to and devastate the crowns of giant sequoias, cutting back the messy understory of bushes and trees – and removing all the tinder-dry vegetation that will turn any wildfire into a conflagration,” Dr. Kenk said.

“The Park hasn’t seen significant fire in over 100 years and is ripe for a major wildfire. We cannot wait for the state to execute a five-year plan. We need to act now to get ahead of a fire. We need to immediately mobilize a cavalry of forest crews to restore an ecologically healthy forest. Don’t wait to act until there is a four-alarm wildfire here. The time to prepare is NOW.”

In the resolution by the CBTA board – many of whom reside in small adjacent mountain towns of Arnold and Murphys – the Association urged Armando Quintero, Director of California State Parks, to designate the local Park as a top priority and immediately act to reduce the vast build-up of hazardous fuels “because the fire’s coming.”

The Board resolution also cautioned that the work must be done before pile burning or the state’s next planned prescribed burn in the Spring. “California needs to mirror the federal approach of clearing the sequoia forests of fuels, *followed* by periodic controlled burns to keep them healthy and fire resilient. This is not a one-time effort, but must be consistently maintained in the future.”

Calaveras Big Trees State Park preserves two groups of giant sequoias in its North and South Groves. It is the site of the beloved and internationally acclaimed Pioneer Cabin Tree that fell in a 2017 winter storm. Some of its giant sequoias may be two thousand years old. The Park is the oldest continuously operated tourist destination in California, dating back to 1852.

Its year-around recreation opportunities attract 250,000 visitors a year to the small rural, mountain community of Arnold, making it the jewel of the local resort community since it became a state park in 1931.

About Calaveras Big Trees Association

The Calaveras Big Trees Association is the non-profit 501c3 partner of Calaveras Big Trees State Park. It raises funds for educational and interpretive programs at the Park through memberships and donors. It supports the “Buses to Big Trees” program to bring fifth grade students from underserved areas to the Park, student scholarships, seasonal Park aides, summer interns, park docent supplies, the PORTS program that brings the Park virtually to classrooms, the California Naturalist Program, as well as staffing the store in the Visitor Center at the Park. www.bigtrees.org

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