



651 Commerce Drive
Roseville, CA 95678

(916) 781-3636

www.ncpa.com

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Chair Harriet Hageman
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries
House Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Hageman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Enclosed please find my responses to the Questions for the Record following the January 8, 2026 oversight hearing entitled, "Fix Our Forests for Affordable and Reliable Water and Power Supplies."

I appreciate the opportunity to provide additional technical detail and clarification on the issues discussed during the hearing. The Northern California Power Agency (NCPA) and our member communities remain committed to supporting federal efforts to address wildfire risk, improve forest health, protect watersheds, and ensure reliable and affordable electricity for the communities we serve.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should further information be helpful. Thank you again for your continued leadership on these important issues.

Sincerely,

RANDY S. HOWARD
General Manager
Northern California Power Agency

Responses to Questions for the Record

Randy S. Howard

General Manager, Northern California Power Agency (NCPA)

Oversight Hearing: “Fix Our Forests for Affordable and Reliable Water and Power Supplies”

Hearing date: January 8, 2026

Submission date: January 28, 2026

I. Response to Question from Representative Mike Ezell

Question: “Healthy forests are necessary for environmental stewardship and ecosystem protection on many levels. To keep a forest healthy, we need to manage them through active, structured harvesting, and early control of stand density. The expansion and updating of sawmills and wood processing facilities requires financing, and there is an option that our government has been working on through a pilot program called the Timber Production Expansion Program (TPEP). TPEP is the USDA's primary tool for expanding milling and processing capacity by providing federally backed loan guarantees to support the establishment, reopening, expansion, and modernization of sawmills. Unfortunately, TPEP expires at the end of this fiscal year. Would the panelists make comment on this program?”

Active forest management requires both authorization to treat acres and the downstream capacity to process the material removed. Across the West, the long-term decline and volatility in sawmill infrastructure have created a structural bottleneck: treatments that generate small-diameter logs and biomass often outpace the market’s ability to absorb them. This mismatch slows hazardous fuel reduction, raises unit costs, and leaves cut material on the ground where it elevates fire risk—conditions that directly affect utility ignition risk and reliability.

A U.S. Forest Service (USFS) analysis entitled “An Overview of the Forest products Sector Downturn in the United States,” documents significant mill closures and reduced utilization in western states following the 2006–2010 downturn, which reduced regional throughput and resilience to supply surges from fuels projects ([USDA Forest Service, Keegan et al., 2012](#)).

From a technical and operational standpoint, programs that expand milling and processing capacity—such as the TPEP’s federally backed loan guarantees—address several critical constraints identified by the USFS:

- **Throughput and sizing:** modern thinning prescriptions produce predominantly small-diameter logs. Upgrades to high-speed small-log lines, debarkers, kilns, chip handling, and biomass cogeneration increase the system’s ability to accept fuel-reduction material.

- **Logistics and haul radius:** additional receiving yards and satellite log-yards reduce cycle time and truck queuing, allowing treatments to be scheduled in narrower seasonal windows with fewer mobilizations.
- **Market stability:** adding capacity dampens price swings when multiple fuel-reduction projects or post-fire salvage operations overlap, lowering the risk of stalled projects and stranded slash.

From the electric utility perspective, every month of delay in removing beetle-killed or structurally compromised hazard trees outside rights-of-way increases the probability of line strikes and the need for disruptive conservative operations such as Public Safety Power Shutoffs. Restoring a viable wood products chain complements permitting reforms and makes fuel treatments economically executable at pace and scale. Sustaining and extending federal support for processing capacity, like reauthorizing the TPEP, is an important tool in reducing wildfire risk and protecting watersheds, reservoirs, and grid infrastructure.

II. Responses to Questions from Chair Harriet Hageman

Question 1: Why is it difficult to work with federal land management agencies to find a solution to place sediment and material that originated on their land before filling NCPA's reservoirs?

One result of extreme weather events is the dramatically greater rate of erosion and accelerated sediment buildup at hydropower reservoirs. In Northern California upstream runoff from USFS land has resulted in nearly 20 times the expected amount of sediment. Sediment buildup at hydropower reservoirs jeopardizes water availability, power production, and dam integrity. There's no question that the sediment must be removed. But where to deposit the non-contaminated material has become a major problem – with the commonsense solution being the adjacent federal lands from which the debris originated. Unfortunately, receiving the necessary approvals from federal land management agencies has not been previously successful. As explained more fully below, the federal approach to this time-sensitive issue is outdated, inconsistent among regions as well as agencies, and often prohibitively costly. NCPA and APPA urge Congress to enact reforms to streamline the permitting process for hydropower-related sediment relocation on adjacent federal lands.

Technical context: Post-wildfire basins often experience a step-change in sediment yield due to canopy loss, soil hydrophobicity, and slope destabilization. USGS field studies in the Sierra Nevada measured year-two sediment delivery that was an order of magnitude above long-term averages following the 2021 Caldor Fire, with salvage logging and higher rainfall amplifying delivery (USGS 2025). Lidar-based studies in southern California similarly show that ~90% of post-fire sediment originates on hillslopes rather than in channels, confirming the geomorphic basis for rapid reservoir delta growth after major burns (USGS/USFS 2021).

Operational challenge: Although this sediment clearly originates on adjacent federal lands and is mobilized by natural processes, current permitting pathways to redeposit non-contaminated material back onto those lands are inconsistent among regions and often impracticable on urgent timelines. In APPA and NCPA's recent experience, reasons cited by federal land managers for denying or delaying redeposition have included: requirements to identify an off-site placement location first; potential impacts to listed species (e.g., northern spotted owl) even where activity occurs in previously disturbed or low-quality habitat; assertions that redeposition is not an authorized special use; and instructions to secure concurrence from third-party collaborative groups before agencies will review.

Near-Source Redeposition is the Lowest-Impact Option: Near-source redeposition is frequently the lowest-impact option because it maintains watershed sediment budgets, avoids long-haul trucking emissions, and allows beneficial reuse (e.g., road prism reinforcement, meadow restoration, firebreaks). Where redeposition is blocked, utilities must instead mobilize mechanical dredging and long-distance hauling, delaying risk reduction and increasing exposure of hydropower intakes to turbidity and debris (USGS 2023; USGS Debris-Flow Hazard Assessments).

Needed federal alignment: A durable, uniform authority for timely sediment redeposition and beneficial reuse on USFS/BLM lands—paired with categorical exclusions for post-fire recovery within hydroelectric watersheds—would realign administrative practice with geomorphic reality.

Question 2: How does NCPA deal with this debris now, and what are the impacts on your ratepayers?

Current approach: Absent a practicable redeposition pathway, NCPA is monitoring delta progression and planning staged mechanical removal to preserve intake approach depth and reduce turbine fouling risk. Bathymetric surveys, turbidity monitoring, and sediment-transport modeling are used to estimate encroachment toward the intake structure and to set trigger points for intervention.

Cost and rate impacts: Engineering and environmental scoping indicate that removing approximately 25% of the accumulated material—the minimum action to restore operational margin—will cost an estimated \$60 million. Removing the full accumulated volume would cost roughly four times that amount. On a cost-of-service basis, this translates to roughly \$16/MWh over 10 years (or about \$5.50/MWh over 30 years, a horizon that is unrealistic given continued refilling). These figures reflect our internal estimates and demonstrates a direct negative impact to affordability to the ratepayer.

Technical risks of delay: Post-fire sedimentation reduces forebay depth, increases approach velocities at intakes, elevates trash-rack loading, and raises the likelihood of high-turbidity shutdowns and cavitation events. USGS post-fire studies document sharp second-year pulses in sediment yield that can overwhelm reservoir storage buffers, while USACE and Reclamation guidance warn that deferred action leads to higher future removal costs and reduced system reliability (USGS 2025; USACE 2023; USBR 2006).

Path to sustainability: NCPA previously obtained authorization for a sluicing procedure, but the terms were operationally unworkable and the authorization expired. We are preparing new environmental documentation for a functional sluicing regime designed to route sediment during high-flow windows, consistent with federal guidance that emphasizes routing and flushing as components of sustainable reservoir sediment management when feasible (USACE 2017; USACE 2019; USBR 2022). Given today's excessive inventory, mechanical removal of the first tranche (~25%) is required before sluicing can be safely and effectively implemented. Once volumes are reduced, a periodic routing/sluicing operation can maintain capacity with minimal lost generation relative to repeated large-scale dredge-and-haul cycles (USBR 2022; USACE 2023).

In sum, timely federal authorization for near-source redeposition and a practicable sluicing plan will materially reduce costs to customers while improving watershed condition and grid reliability. These actions are consistent with the technical consensus across USGS, the Bureau of Reclamation, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that sustainable reservoir operation requires active, ongoing sediment management rather than deferred removal.

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Note: All external sources cited above are public-domain publications or webpages of U.S. federal agencies (USGS, USDA Forest Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation).