

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## A SUMMARY OF FIRE FREQUENCY ESTIMATES FOR CALIFORNIA VEGETATION BEFORE EURO-AMERICAN SETTLEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

California fire regimes have been altered from those that occurred prior to Euro-American settlement, and are predicted to continue to change as global climates warm. Inclusion of fire as a landscape-level process is considered essential to successful ecological restoration in many ecosystems, and presettlement fire regimes provide foundational information for restoration or “realignment” of ecosystems as climate change and land use changes progress. The objective of our study was to provide an up-to-date, comprehensive summary of presettlement fire frequency estimates for California ecosystems dominated by woody plants, and to supply the basis for fire return interval departure (FRID) mapping and analysis in California. Using the LANDFIRE Biophysical Settings (BpS) vegetation-fire regime types as a framework, we used literature review and the outcomes of regional expert workshops to develop twenty-eight presettlement fire regime (PFR) groups based on similarity of their relationships with fire. We then conducted an exhaustive review of the published and unpublished literature pertaining to fire return intervals (FRIs) observed prior to significant Euro-American settlement in the twenty-eight PFRs, and summarized the values to provide a single estimate of the mean, median, mean minimum, and mean maximum FRI for each PFR.

Much variability was evident among PFRs, with mean FRIs ranging from 11 yr to 610 yr, and median FRIs ranging from 7 yr to 610 yr; mean minimum FRIs ranged from 5 yr to 190 yr, and mean maximum FRIs ranged from 40 yr to 1440 yr. There was also high variability within many PFRs, and differences between minimum and maximum FRIs ranged from 32 yr to 1324 yr. Generally, median FRIs were lowest for productive drier forests such as yellow pine, dry and moist mixed conifer, and oak woodland (7 yr, 9 yr, 12 yr, and 12 yr, respectively). Median FRIs were highest for less productive woodlands such as pinyon-juniper (94 yr), high elevation types such as subalpine forest (132 yr), very dry types such as desert mixed shrub (610 yr), and productive moist forests such as spruce-hemlock (275 yr mean FRI). Our summary of California’s presettlement fire regimes

should be a useful reference for scientists and resource managers, whether they are seeking a general estimate of the central tendency and variability of FRIs in a broadly defined vegetation type, background information for a planned restoration project or a mechanistic model of vegetation-fire interactions, or a list of literature pertaining to a specific vegetation type or geographic location.

**Keywords:** California, fire frequency, fire history, fire return interval, FRID, presettlement fire regime

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## INTRODUCTION

Fire is an important process in many of California's ecosystems, and it is becoming increasingly evident that fire regimes (including fire frequency, severity, extent, spatial patterning, etc.) have been greatly altered in some vegetation types by land use patterns and altered ecosystem processes associated with Euro-American settlement (i.e., after 1850) (Sugihara *et al.* 2006, Stephens *et al.* 2007, Skinner *et al.* 2009). Climatic variability at a variety of temporal scales has been shown to be associated with fire regime fluctuations in the past (Swetnam 1993). Anthropogenic climate change is a driver of current observed trends of increasing fire activity, and is predicted to continue to alter fire regimes and vegetation types in the future (Lenihan *et al.* 2003, Westerling *et al.* 2006, Miller *et al.* 2009, Gedalof 2011, National Research Council 2011). Consideration of fire as a landscape-level process is considered essential to facilitating ecological restoration or "realignment" (*sensu* Millar *et al.* 2007) efforts intended to increase ecosystem resilience in the face of climate change (North *et al.* 2009a). Restoration of narrowly defined historical conditions may no longer be a preferred management prescription in light of the uncertainty surrounding the effects of climate change on fire and other ecological processes. However, information on fire regimes before Euro-American settlement

is of fundamental importance to modern and future management of many ecosystems in western North America (Millar *et al.* 2007; Wiens *et al.*, in press). Such historical information can help, among other things, to document the current status of fire in ecosystems and trends in fire activity and ecological effects over time; to encourage understanding of the underlying mechanisms that drive ecosystem response to changes in climate, fire, landscapes, and their interactions; and to provide data upon which models of "properly functioning" or "resilient" ecosystems might be built (Wiens *et al.*, in press).

Drawing comparisons between presettlement and current fire regimes can also assist land managers in prioritizing areas for ecological restoration. Fire return interval departure (FRID) analysis facilitates quantification of the difference between current and presettlement fire return intervals (FRIs), allowing managers to target areas at high risk of type conversion due to altered fire regimes (Caprio *et al.* 1997, Caprio and Graber 2000, van Wagtenonk *et al.* 2002). Robust estimates of the variability of presettlement FRIs in different vegetation types are a crucial part of FRID analysis, yet most fire history studies are highly localized, making it difficult to apply the results of individual studies to a regional-scale mapping and assessment effort.

Much work has been accomplished in documenting historical fire regimes in various

vegetation types throughout California, and while several manuscripts summarize different subsets of this information, they are often either restricted to data derived from tree-ring studies, limited to forest vegetation types in a particular geographic region, or not intended to be comprehensive (e.g., Heyerdahl *et al.* 1995, Skinner and Chang 1996, Stephens *et al.* 2007). Thus, scientists and land managers currently lack a single source that summarizes all of the literature pertaining to presettlement fire regimes. The objectives of this paper are to provide an up-to-date comprehensive summary of presettlement fire frequency estimates for California ecosystems dominated by woody plants, and to provide the quantitative basis for fire return interval departure (FRID) mapping across California.

## METHODS

Although the state of California is home to a high diversity of species, vegetation types, and fire regimes (Barbour *et al.* 2007), similarities among fire regimes and their effects on vegetation generally allow the organization of ecosystems into broad fire regime groups. Published efforts to categorize relationships between fire and vegetation in California include Agee (1993; northern California), Skinner and Chang (1996; Sierra Nevada), Stephenson and Calcarone (1999; southern California), Arno (2000; western US), Sugihara *et al.* (2006; statewide), Sawyer *et al.* (2010; statewide), and the LANDFIRE project (2010; Rollins 2009; entire US). Both the Sugihara *et al.* (2006) and Sawyer *et al.* (2010) efforts drew from a series of Joint Fire Science Program supported regional workshops held between 2000 and 2002 that reunited fire and vegetation experts from across the state and developed descriptions of fire regime characteristics for California vegetation communities. All of this information also fed the development of the LANDFIRE Biophysical Settings (BpS), which are potential natural vege-

tation (PNV) types linked to quantitative models of disturbance and succession (Rollins 2009). The disturbance-succession models for the California BpS types (which apply to the pre-Euro-American settlement period) were developed at a series of regional expert workshops sponsored by The Nature Conservancy in 2004 and 2005. After refinement and peer review, the BpS classification was finalized and mapped as part of the national LANDFIRE project (see Rollins 2009 and [www.landfire.gov](http://www.landfire.gov) for details).

As an evolutionary outgrowth of the previous fire regime work cited above, the LANDFIRE Biophysical Settings represents the current state of the art for linking vegetation and pre-Euro-American settlement fire regimes across California. There are more than eighty individual BpS types mapped in California by LANDFIRE, but some are extremely uncommon, and many share similar fire regimes. Using the fire regime information provided for each BpS in the type description (LANDFIRE 2010), and referring to integrative vegetation and fire resources in the literature (see citations above, plus, e.g., Burns and Honkala 1990, Potter 1998, Barbour and Billings 2000, Barbour *et al.* 2007) and on the internet (e.g., the Fire Effects Information System [<http://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/>]), we reduced the BpS list down to a smaller number of pre-Euro-American settlement fire regime groups (PFRs) that we subjectively considered sufficiently different to warrant retention. From our research, we also identified a number of PFRs that were not represented in the BpS classification. PFRs were designed to balance a reasonably small number of fire regime groups with sufficiently high discrimination in fire regime characteristics. We solicited peer review of the PFR list from 27 California fire and vegetation ecology experts and received responses from eleven. After adjustment, our final list included 28 PFRs.

For each PFR, we conducted an exhaustive review of the published and unpublished liter-

ature pertaining to mean, median, minimum, and maximum fire return intervals observed prior to significant Euro-American settlement (i.e., the middle of the nineteenth century). Sources included fire histories derived from dendrochronological and charcoal deposition records, modeling studies, and expert quantitative estimates. Priority was given to studies conducted in California, but sources from other states in western North America were included as appropriate for PFRs for which information was limited. When all sources were compiled, the average was taken of all mean, median, minimum, and maximum FRI values to yield a single mean, median, mean minimum, and mean maximum FRI estimate for each PFR. Thus, the minimum and maximum FRI estimates we provide for each PFR are not absolute minima and maxima, but typical mean values that would be expected across the geographical range of each PFR.

For conifer-dominated PFRs, most FRI values considered in this assessment were derived from small-scale (<4 ha) composite dendrochronological fire histories including records from multiple trees in a defined area, although some values were obtained from modeling or stand age-based studies (in the latter case, for PFRs characterized by stand-replacing fires). Composite FRIs often represent the fire history of a given area better than point FRIs (derived from a single tree) because some fire events fail to scar every recording tree within the fire perimeter, especially in regimes characterized by frequent low intensity fire (Collins and Stephens 2007, Falk *et al.* 2011). Furthermore, composite FRIs are more sensitive and better suited to analyzing changes in fire occurrence than point FRIs (Dieterich 1980, Swetnam and Baisan 2003). While there is some variability introduced by using composite FRIs from different-sized areas, they are less likely to underestimate presettlement FRI values than point FRIs.

## RESULTS

Relationships between the PFRs and LANDFIRE BpS types are shown in Table 1; characteristic dominant woody species for each PFR are listed in Table 2. Four PFRs were not represented by any BpS types, due to their geographic rarity or their focus on single species. These were the “fire sensitive spruce or fir,” the “big cone Douglas-fir,” the “shore pine,” and the “silver sagebrush” PFRs.

We derived fire frequency estimates for the 28 PFRs from 298 sources (Table 2). Most of our sources (213 of 298; 71.5%) were based on data collected in California. For the average PFR, 26.5% of sources were non-Californian, but seven PFRs had more than 50% of their sources from outside California (Table 2). These seven, which accounted for about two thirds of all of the non-California sources, are PFRs for which the dominant woody species are at the southern or western edge of their range in California, or are California endemics and very rare in the state (e.g., *Abies bracteata* [D. Don] D. Don ex Poit and *Picea breweriana* S. Watson in the fire sensitive spruce or fir PFR). Sixteen PFRs had  $\leq 20\%$  of their sources from outside California, and seven had exclusively California sources.

Derived mean, median, mean minimum, and mean maximum fire frequencies for each PFR are given in Table 2. Information on median FRIs was lacking for some PFRs, so median values were either taken from expert quantitative estimates of mean FRI (desert mixed shrub, semi-desert chaparral) or were not estimated (coastal fir, shore pine, spruce-hemlock). Because FRI distributions are often skewed (with more short or long intervals, depending on the PFR), median FRI values may be a better approximation of how often a given PFR burned than mean FRIs (Falk 2004).

Much variability is evident among PFRs, with mean FRIs ranging from 11 yr (dry mixed conifer and yellow pine) to 610 yr (desert mixed shrub), median FRIs ranging from 7 yr

**Table 1.** Relationship between Presettlement Fire Regime types (PFRs) and LANDFIRE Biophysical Settings (BpS) mapped in California. BpS types with “none” as PFR assignment are types for which we do not have sufficient data on presettlement fire regimes (e.g., non-woody vegetation, riparian types).

| <b>LANDFIRE Biophysical Setting</b>                                      | <b>PFR</b>                    |
|--|-------------------------------|
| Inter-mountain basins aspen-mixed conifer forest and woodland            | Aspen                         |
| Rocky Mountain aspen forest and woodland                                 | Aspen                         |
| Columbia Plateau steppe and grassland                                    | Big sagebrush                 |
| Inter-mountain basins big sagebrush shrubland                            | Big sagebrush                 |
| Inter-mountain basins big sagebrush steppe                               | Big sagebrush                 |
| Inter-mountain basins montane sagebrush steppe                           | Big sagebrush                 |
| Columbia Plateau low sagebrush steppe                                    | Black and low sagebrush       |
| Great Basin xeric mixed sagebrush shrubland                              | Black and low sagebrush       |
| California coastal closed-cone conifer forest and woodland               | Chaparral-serotinous conifers |
| California maritime chaparral  | Chaparral-serotinous conifers |
| California mesic chaparral   | Chaparral-serotinous conifers |
| California xeric serpentine chaparral                                    | Chaparral-serotinous conifers |
| Klamath-Siskiyou xeromorphic serpentine savanna and chaparral            | Chaparral-serotinous conifers |
| Mediterranean California mesic serpentine woodland and chaparral         | Chaparral-serotinous conifers |
| Northern and central California dry-mesic chaparral                      | Chaparral-serotinous conifers |
| Southern California dry-mesic chaparral                                  | Chaparral-serotinous conifers |
| North Pacific maritime dry-mesic Douglas-fir-western hemlock forest      | Coastal fir                   |
| Baja semi-desert coastal succulent scrub                                 | Coastal sage scrub            |
| Northern California coastal scrub  | Coastal sage scrub            |
| Southern California coastal scrub  | Coastal sage scrub            |
| Inter-mountain basins curl-leaf mountain mahogany woodland and shrubland | Curl-leaf mountain mahogany   |
| Colorado plateau blackbrush-mormon-tea shrubland                         | Desert mixed shrub            |
| Inter-mountain basins greasewood flat                                    | Desert mixed shrub            |
| Inter-mountain basins mixed salt desert scrub                            | Desert mixed shrub            |
| Inter-mountain basins semi-desert shrub-steppe                           | Desert mixed shrub            |
| Mojave mid-elevation mixed desert scrub                                  | Desert mixed shrub            |
| Sonora-Mojave creosotebush-white bursage desert scrub                    | Desert mixed shrub            |
| Sonora-mojave mixed salt desert scrub                                    | Desert mixed shrub            |
| Sonoran mid-elevation desert scrub                                       | Desert mixed shrub            |
| Sonoran paloverde-mixed cacti desert scrub                               | Desert mixed shrub            |
| Mediterranean California dry-mesic mixed conifer forest and woodland     | Dry mixed conifer             |
| Northern rocky mountain foothill conifer wooded steppe                   | Dry mixed conifer             |
| Sierra Nevada subalpine lodgepole pine forest and woodland               | Lodgepole pine                |
| Sierra Nevada subalpine lodgepole pine forest and woodland—dry           | Lodgepole pine                |
| Sierra Nevada subalpine lodgepole pine forest and woodland—wet           | Lodgepole pine                |
| Central and southern California mixed evergreen woodland                 | Mixed evergreen               |
| Mediterranean California mixed evergreen forest                          | Mixed evergreen               |
| Klamath-Siskiyou upper montane serpentine mixed conifer woodland         | Moist mixed conifer           |
| Mediterranean California mesic mixed conifer forest and woodland         | Moist mixed conifer           |
| California montane woodland and chaparral                                | Montane chaparral             |
| Southern California oak woodland and savanna                             | Oak woodland                  |

**Table 1**, continued.

| <b>LANDFIRE Biophysical Setting</b>  | <b>PFR</b>            |
|--|-----------------------|
| California central valley and southern coastal grassland                     | none                  |
| California central valley riparian woodland and shrubland                    | none                  |
| California mesic serpentine grassland  | none                  |
| California montane riparian systems  | none                  |
| California northern coastal grassland  | none                  |
| Inter-mountain basins montane riparian systems                               | none                  |
| Inter-mountain basins semi-desert grassland                                  | none                  |
| Mediterranean California alpine dry tundra                                   | none                  |
| Mediterranean California alpine fell-field                                   | none                  |
| Mediterranean California subalpine meadow                                    | none                  |
| North American warm desert riparian systems                                  | none                  |
| North Pacific montane grassland  | none                  |
| Pacific coastal marsh systems  | none                  |
| California central valley mixed oak savanna                                  | Oak woodland          |
| California coastal live oak woodland and savanna                             | Oak woodland          |
| California lower montane blue oak-foothill pine woodland and savanna         | Oak woodland          |
| Mediterranean California mixed oak woodland                                  | Oak woodland          |
| North Pacific oak woodland   | Oak woodland          |
| Columbia Plateau western juniper woodland and savanna                        | Pinyon juniper        |
| Colorado Plateau pinyon-juniper woodland                                     | Pinyon-juniper        |
| Great Basin pinyon-juniper woodland  | Pinyon-juniper        |
| Inter-mountain basins juniper savanna  | Pinyon-juniper        |
| Mediterranean California red fir forest                                      | Red fir               |
| Mediterranean California red fir forest—Cascades                             | Red fir               |
| Mediterranean California red fir forest—southern Sierra                      | Red fir               |
| California coastal redwood forest  | Redwood               |
| Great Basin semi-desert chaparral  | Semi-desert chaparral |
| Sonora-Mojave semi-desert chaparral  | Semi-desert chaparral |
| North pacific hypermaritime sitka spruce forest                              | Spruce-hemlock        |
| North Pacific lowland riparian forest and shrubland                          | Spruce-hemlock        |
| North Pacific maritime mesic-wet Douglas-fir-western hemlock forest          | Spruce-hemlock        |
| Inter-mountain basins subalpine limber-bristlecone pine woodland             | Subalpine forest      |
| Mediterranean California subalpine woodland                                  | Subalpine forest      |
| Mediterranean California subalpine woodland                                  | Subalpine forest      |
| North Pacific maritime mesic subalpine parkland                              | Subalpine forest      |
| Northern California mesic subalpine woodland                                 | Subalpine forest      |
| Sierra Nevada alpine dwarf-shrubland   | Subalpine forest      |
| Sierran-intermontane desert western white pine-white fir woodland            | Western white pine    |
| California montane Jeffrey pine(-ponderosa pine) woodland                    | Yellow pine           |
| Mediterranean California lower montane black oak-conifer forest and woodland | Yellow pine           |
| Northern Rocky Mountain ponderosa pine woodland and savanna—mesic            | Yellow pine           |
| Northern Rocky Mountain ponderosa pine woodland and savanna—xeric            | Yellow pine           |

**Table 2.** Reference fire return intervals (FRIs) of pre-Euro-American settlement fire regimes (PFRs) considered in this analysis, and sources (citations on following pages, asterisks denote studies conducted wholly or mostly outside of California). Mean minimum and mean maximum are rounded to the nearest multiple of 5.

| PFR                                       | Characteristic dominant woody species  | Mean | Median          | Mean | Mean | Sources  |
|---|--|------|-----------------|------|------|--|
|   |  |      |                 | Min  | Max  |  |
| Aspen                                     | <i>Populus tremuloides</i> Michx, various conifers   | 19   | 20              | 10   | 90   | 1-7  |
| Big sagebrush                             | <i>Artemisia tridentata</i> Nutt., <i>Purshia tridentata</i> (Pursh.) DC., <i>Chrysothamnus</i> spp.   | 35   | 41              | 15   | 85   | 2, 4, 7-22, 281-283  |
| Bigcone Douglas-fir                       | <i>Pseudotsuga macrocarpa</i> (Vasey) Mayr, <i>Quercus chrysolepis</i> Liebm.  | 31   | 30              | 5    | 95   | 2, 23-26   |
| Black and low sagebrush <sup>1</sup>      | <i>Artemisia nova</i> A. Nelson, <i>A. arbuscula</i> Nutt.   | 66   | 53              | 35   | 115  | 2, 4, 12, 13, 21, 22, 27-31, 284   |
| California juniper                        | <i>Juniperus occidentalis</i> Hook.  | 83   | 77              | 5    | 335  | 2, 13, 15, 18, 32  |
| Chaparral and serotinous conifers         | <i>Adenostoma</i> spp., <i>Arctostaphylos</i> spp., <i>Ceanothus</i> spp., <i>Quercus berberidifolia</i> Liebm., other shrubs; <i>Pinus attenuata</i> Lemmon, <i>P. muricata</i> D. Don, <i>Cupressus</i> spp., other serotinous conifers  | 55   | 59              | 30   | 90   | 2, 33-72   |
| Coastal fir <sup>1</sup>                  | <i>Abies grandis</i> (Douglas ex D. Don) Lindl., <i>Pseudotsuga menziesii</i> (Mirb.) Franco   | 99   | NA <sup>2</sup> | 90   | 435  | 73-84  |
| Coastal sage scrub                        | <i>Artemisia californica</i> Less., <i>Baccharis pilularis</i> DC., <i>Eriogonum fasciculatum</i> Benth., <i>Salvia</i> spp., etc.   | 76   | 100             | 20   | 120  | 2, 25, 44, 47, 48, 71, 85-94   |
| Curl-leaf mountain mahogany <sup>1</sup>  | <i>Cercocarpus ledifolius</i> Nutt.  | 52   | 62              | 30   | 130  | 2, 4, 7, 14, 16, 18, 22, 95-98   |
| Desert mixed shrub                        | <i>Atriplex</i> spp., <i>Sarcobatus vermiculatus</i> (Hook.) Torr., <i>Larrea tridentata</i> (DC.) Coville, <i>Coleogyne ramosissima</i> Torr., <i>Prosopis</i> spp., <i>Yucca</i> spp., <i>Ephedra</i> spp., <i>Opuntia</i> spp., etc.  | 610  | 610             | 120  | 1440 | 2, 99-108  |
| Dry mixed conifer                         | <i>Pinus ponderosa</i> , <i>P. lambertiana</i> Douglas, <i>Calocedrus decurrens</i> (Torr.) Florin, <i>Abies concolor</i> (Gord. & Glend.) Lindl ex Hildebr., <i>Quercus kelloggii</i> Newberry  | 11   | 9               | 5    | 50   | 3, 6, 24, 68, 70, 71, 109-140  |
| Fire sensitive spruce or fir <sup>1</sup> | <i>Abies amabilis</i> (Douglas ex Louden) Douglas ex Forbes, <i>A. bracteata</i> , <i>Picea engelmannii</i> Perry ex Engelm., <i>P. breweriana</i>   | 117  | 93              | 90   | 250  | 2, 22, 44, 141-157, 278-280, 285-297   |
| Lodgepole pine                            | <i>Pinus contorta</i> Douglas ex Louden ssp. <i>murrayana</i> (Balf.) Engelm.  | 37   | 36              | 15   | 290  | 2, 3, 5, 6, 21, 68, 70, 112, 125, 127, 132, 158-172  |
| Mixed evergreen                           | <i>Pseudotsuga menziesii</i> , <i>Lithocarpus densiflorus</i> (Hook. & Arn.) Rehder, <i>Quercus agrifolia</i> Née, <i>Q. chrysolepis</i> , <i>Umbellularia californica</i> (Hook. & Arn.) Nutt., <i>Arbutus menziesii</i> Pursh, <i>Acer macrophyllum</i> Pursh, <i>Taxus brevifolia</i> Nutt. | 29   | 13              | 15   | 80   | 2, 23, 44, 74, 82, 127, 173-187  |
| Moist mixed conifer                       | <i>A. concolor</i> , <i>Pseudotsuga menziesii</i> , <i>Calocedrus decurrens</i> , <i>Pinus ponderosa</i> , <i>P. lambertiana</i> , <i>P. contorta</i> ssp. <i>murrayana</i> , <i>Sequoiadendron giganteum</i> (Lindl.) J. Buchholz   | 16   | 12              | 5    | 80   | 2, 3, 6, 68, 70, 71, 98, 110-113, 116, 117, 119, 121-123, 125, 127-130, 132, 133, 136, 145, 147, 164, 168, 170, 183, 187-209 |

<sup>1</sup> PFRs for which >50% of sources are from outside California.

<sup>2</sup> Not applicable.

Table 2, continued.

| PFR                         | Characteristic dominant woody species  | Mean | Median          | Mean Min | Mean Max | Sources   |
|-----------------------------|--|------|-----------------|----------|----------|---|
| Montane chaparral           | <i>Arctostaphylos</i> spp., <i>Ceanothus</i> spp., <i>Quercus vaccinifolia</i> Kellogg, <i>Prunus ilicifolia</i> (Nutt. Ex Hook. & Arn) D. Dietr., <i>Chrysolepis sempervirens</i> (Kellogg) Hjelmquist, other shrubs  | 27   | 24              | 15       | 50       | 2, 33, 58, 68, 209-211  |
| Oak woodland                | <i>Quercus douglasii</i> Hook & Arn, <i>Q. lobata</i> Née, <i>Q. wislizenii</i> A. DC., <i>Pinus sabiniana</i> Douglas ex Douglas  | 12   | 12              | 5        | 45       | 2, 44, 68, 127, 186, 212-225  |
| Pinyon-juniper <sup>1</sup> | <i>Pinus monophylla</i> Torr. & Frém., <i>Juniperus</i> spp.,  | 151  | 94              | 50       | 250      | 2, 14, 16, 22, 71, 89, 226-233  |
| Port Orford cedar           | <i>Chamaecyparis lawsoniana</i> (A. Murray) Parl.  | 30   | 16              | 10       | 160      | 2, 98, 144, 147, 168, 173, 177, 187, 188, 205, 234-237  |
| Red fir                     | <i>Abies magnifica</i> A. Murray, <i>A. concolor</i> , <i>Pinus monticola</i> Douglas ex D. Don, <i>P. murrayana</i>   | 40   | 33              | 15       | 130      | 2, 3, 6, 68, 110, 112, 119, 127, 132, 134, 162, 164, 168-170, 172, 181, 187, 238-248                    |
| Redwood                     | <i>Sequoia sempervirens</i> (Lamb. Ex D. Don) Endl.  | 23   | 15              | 10       | 170      | 2, 44, 74, 82, 174, 178, 179, 182, 186, 249-257   |
| Semi-desert chaparral       | <i>Adenostoma fasciculatum</i> Hook. & Arn., <i>Arctostaphylos</i> spp., <i>Cercocarpus betuloides</i> Nutt., <i>Eriogonum fasciculatum</i> Benth., <i>Purshia glandulosa</i> Curran, <i>Fremontodendron californicum</i> (Torr.) Coville, <i>Quercus john-tuckeri</i> Nixon & C.H. Mull, etc. | 65   | 65              | 50       | 115      | 2, 258-261  |
| Shore pine <sup>1</sup>     | <i>Pinus contorta</i> Douglas ex Louden ssp. <i>contorta</i>   | 250  | NA <sup>2</sup> | 190      | 1025     | 78, 262, 277  |
| Silver sagebrush            | <i>Artemisia cana</i> Pursh  | 35   | 31              | 15       | 65       | 2, 10, 58, 263, 264, 298  |
| Spruce-hemlock <sup>1</sup> | <i>Picea sitchensis</i> (Bong.) Carrière, <i>Tsuga heterophylla</i> (Raf.) Sarg., <i>Pseudotsuga menziesii</i>   | 275  | NA <sup>2</sup> | 180      | 550      | 75, 77, 80, 265-269   |
| Subalpine forest            | <i>Tsuga mertensiana</i> (Bong.) Carrière, <i>Pinus albicaulis</i> Engelm., <i>P. monticola</i> , <i>P. contorta</i> ssp. <i>murrayana</i> , <i>P. flexilis</i> James, <i>P. balfouriana</i> Balf., <i>P. longaeva</i> D.K. Bailey, <i>Abies magnifica</i>                                     | 133  | 132             | 100      | 420      | 2, 68, 98, 112, 143, 164, 165, 168, 172, 187, 199, 270-272  |
| Western white pine          | <i>Pinus monticola</i>   | 50   | 42              | 15       | 370      | 2, 6, 98, 112, 119, 127, 134, 147, 164, 166, 168-170, 172, 199, 245, 257, 273                           |
| Yellow pine                 | <i>Pinus ponderosa</i> , <i>P. jeffreyi</i> , <i>P. washoensis</i> H. Mason & Stockw., <i>P. lambertiana</i> , <i>Quercus kelloggii</i>  | 11   | 7               | 5        | 40       | 2, 3, 14, 21, 68, 70, 71, 113, 116, 117, 119, 127, 131, 132, 134, 165, 169, 189, 200, 224, 263, 274-276 |

<sup>1</sup> PFRs for which >50% of sources are from outside California.

<sup>2</sup> Not applicable.



- 1 Richardson and Provencher 2005
- 2 Sawyer *et al.* 2009
- 3 Van de Water and North 2010
- 4 Wall *et al.* 2001\*
- 5 Riegel *et al.* 2006
- 6 Beaty and Taylor 2008
- 7 Miller *et al.* 2001\*
- 8 Major *et al.* 2005
- 9 Zielinski and Provencher 2005
- 10 Medlyn and Kolden 2005
- 11 Winward 1991\*
- 12 Miller and Rose 1999\*
- 13 Young and Evans 1981
- 14 Gruell 1999\*
- 15 Martin and Johnson 1979
- 16 Gruell *et al.* 1994\*
- 17 Mensing *et al.* 2006\*
- 18 Miller and Heyerdahl 2008
- 19 Sapsis 1990\*
- 20 Bork 1984\*
- 21 Norman and Taylor 2005
- 22 Kitchen 2010\*
- 23 Sugihara and Borgias 2005
- 24 Safford and Keeler-Wolf 2005
- 25 Byrne 1978
- 26 Lombardo *et al.* 2009
- 27 Kolden and Medlyn 2005
- 28 Burkhardt and Tisdale 1976\*
- 29 Kitchen and McArthur 2007\*
- 30 Knick *et al.* 2005\*
- 31 Loope and Gruell 1973\*
- 32 Reeberg and Weisberg 2006
- 33 Sugihara *et al.* 2004
- 34 Foster 2006a
- 35 Syphard and Foster 2006
- 36 Beyers and Parker 2006
- 37 Keeler-Wolf *et al.* 2005
- 38 Syphard and Beyers 2006
- 39 Minnich 2006
- 40 Ne'eman *et al.* 1999
- 41 Vogl 1973
- 42 Conard and Weise 1998
- 43 Minnich 1989
- 44 Greenlee and Langenheim 1990
- 45 Keeley and Fotheringham 2001
- 46 Borchert 2008
- 47 Byrne *et al.* 1977
- 48 Mensing *et al.* 1999
- 49 Minnich and Chou 1997
- 50 Minnich 2001
- 51 Moritz *et al.* 2004
- 52 Moritz 2003
- 53 Zedler 1995
- 54 De Gouvenain and Ansary 2006
- 55 Wells *et al.* 2003
- 56 Mallek 2009
- 57 Stephens *et al.* 2004
- 58 Wright and Bailey 1982
- 59 Keeley 1982
- 60 Walter and Taha 1999
- 61 Wells and Getis 1999
- 62 Borchert and Foster 2006
- 63 Vogl *et al.* 1977
- 64 Keeley 1981
- 65 Florence 1987
- 66 Davis and Borchert 2006
- 67 Jackson 1977
- 68 Caprio and Lineback 2002
- 69 Zedler 1981
- 70 Minnich *et al.* 2000\*
- 71 Stephenson and Calcarone 1999
- 72 Moir 1982\*
- 73 Kertis *et al.* 2005\*
- 74 Finney and Martin 1989
- 75 Long and Whitlock 2002\*
- 76 Veirs 1980
- 77 Long *et al.* 2007\*
- 78 Brown and Hebda 2002\*
- 79 Long *et al.* 2010\*
- 80 Long *et al.* 1998\*
- 81 McCoy 2006\*
- 82 Stuart 1987
- 83 Agee and Dunwiddie 1984\*
- 84 Walsh *et al.* 2008\*
- 85 Taylor 2006
- 86 Keeler-Wolf and Foster 2006
- 87 Hanes 1971
- 88 Westman 1982
- 89 Paysen *et al.* 2000
- 90 O'Leary 1990
- 91 Vogl 1976
- 92 Russell 1983
- 93 Talluto and Suding 2008
- 94 Keeley *et al.* 2005
- 95 Ross *et al.* 2005
- 96 Arno and Wilson 1983\*
- 97 Erhard 2008\*
- 98 Minckley *et al.* 2007\*
- 99 Dingman and Esque 2005
- 100 Novak-Echenique 2005a
- 101 Novak-Echenique 2005b
- 102 Alford and Ambos 2005
- 103 Esque and McPherson 2005
- 104 Nachlinger 2005\*
- 105 Thomas 1991
- 106 Wright 1986\*
- 107 Brooks and Matchett 2006
- 108 Brown and Minnich 1986
- 109 Arabas *et al.* 2006\*
- 110 Beaty and Taylor 2001
- 111 Beaty and Taylor 2009
- 112 Bekker and Taylor 2001
- 113 Caprio and Swetnam 1995
- 114 Everett 2008
- 115 Evett *et al.* 2007\*
- 116 Fry and Stephens 2006
- 117 Gill and Taylor 2009
- 118 Keeler-Wolf 1991
- 119 Beaty and Taylor 2007
- 120 Hemstrom *et al.* 2008a\*
- 121 Wagener 1961
- 122 Kotok 1930
- 123 Show and Kotok 1924
- 124 Warner 1980
- 125 Caprio 2004c
- 126 Skinner *et al.* 2008\*
- 127 Skinner and Chang 1996
- 128 Skinner *et al.* 2006
- 129 Skinner *et al.* 2009
- 130 Stephens and Collins 2004
- 131 Stephens *et al.* 2003\*
- 132 Swetnam *et al.* 2001
- 133 Swetnam *et al.* 2009
- 134 Taylor 2000
- 135 Taylor 2004\*
- 136 Taylor and Skinner 2003
- 137 Trouet *et al.* 2010\*
- 138 Vaillant and Stephens 2009
- 139 Sherlock and Sugihara 2008
- 140 Gassaway 2005
- 141 Powell and Swanson 2005\*
- 142 Simpson *et al.* 2005\*
- 143 Swanson 2005
- 144 Borgias *et al.* 2005
- 145 Talley and Griffin 1980
- 146 Briles *et al.* 2005
- 147 Briles *et al.* 2008
- 148 Grissino-Mayer *et al.* 1995\*
- 149 Touchan *et al.* 1996\*
- 150 Wadleigh and Jenkins 1996\*
- 151 White and Vankat 1993\*
- 152 Hemstrom *et al.* 2008b\*
- 153 Toney and Anderson 2006\*
- 154 Fulé *et al.* 2003\*
- 155 Schellhaas *et al.* 2001\*
- 156 Anderson *et al.* 2008\*
- 157 Allen *et al.* 2008\*
- 158 Caprio 2004a
- 159 Caprio 2004b
- 160 Keifer 1991
- 161 Caprio 2002
- 162 van Wagtenonk 1995
- 163 Brunelle and Anderson 2003
- 164 Daniels *et al.* 2005
- 165 North *et al.* 2009b
- 166 Pitcher 1987
- 167 Sheppard and Lassoie 1998
- 168 Skinner 2003
- 169 Stephens 2001
- 170 Taylor and Solem 2001
- 171 Caprio 2008
- 172 Hallett and Anderson 2010
- 173 Sugihara *et al.* 2005a
- 174 Veirs 1982
- 175 Hunter 1997
- 176 Atzet and Wheeler 1982\*
- 177 Agee 1991\*
- 178 Brown *et al.* 1999
- 179 Greenlee 1983
- 180 Olson and Agee 2005\*
- 181 Sensenig 2002\*
- 182 Stephens and Fry 2005
- 183 Taylor and Skinner 1995
- 184 Wills and Stuart 1994
- 185 Atzet 1979\*
- 186 Finney and Martin 1992
- 187 Atzet and Martin 1992
- 188 Reilly *et al.* 2005a
- 189 Bradley *et al.* 2005
- 190 Sherlock *et al.* 2005a
- 191 Sherlock *et al.* 2005b
- 192 Kilgore and Taylor 1979
- 193 Thornburgh 1995
- 194 Collins and Stephens 2007
- 195 Fiegner 2002

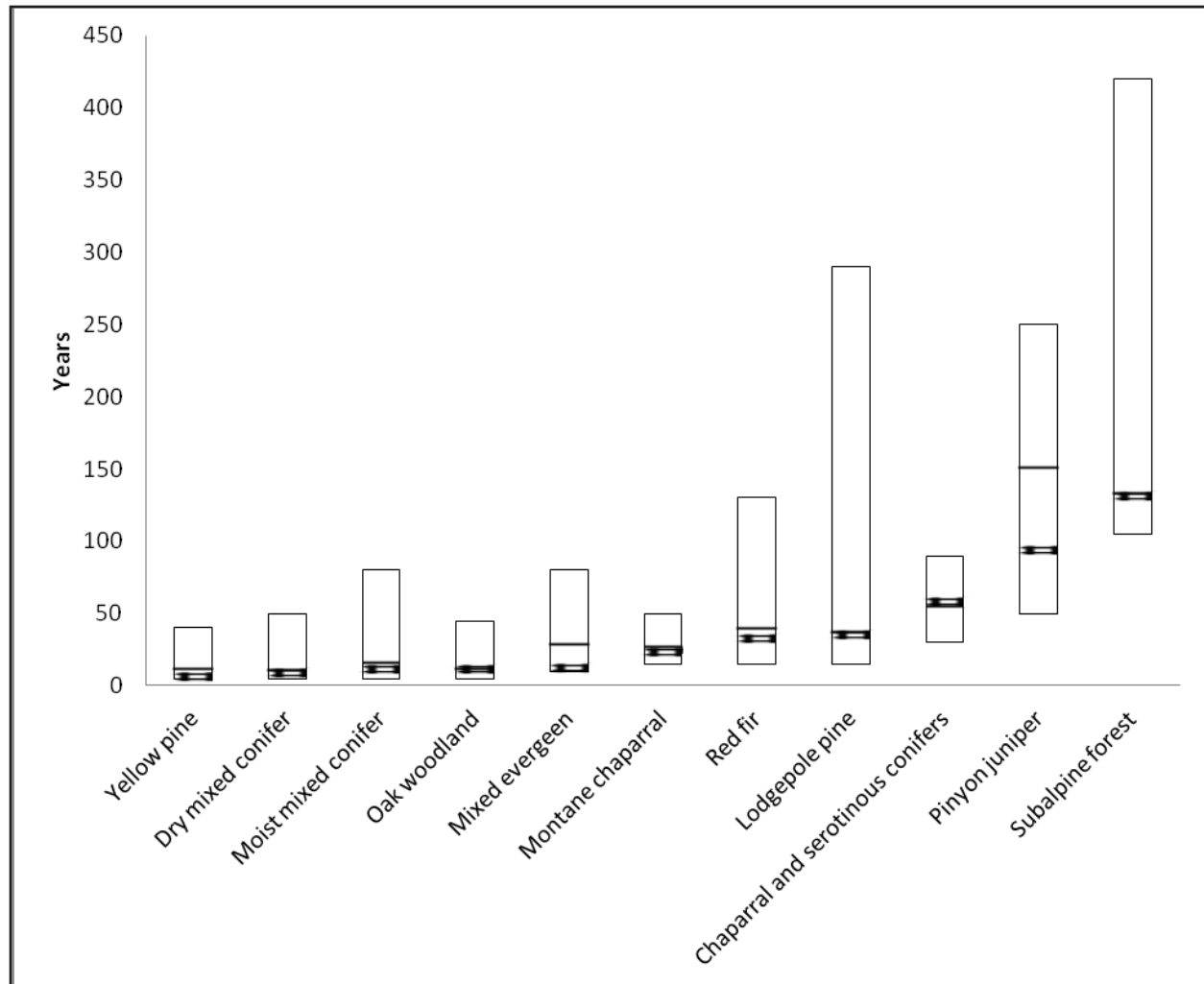
- 196 Sherlock *et al.* 2008  
197 Kilgore 1973  
198 Swetnam *et al.* 1990  
199 Mohr *et al.* 2000  
200 Moody *et al.* 2006  
201 Drumm 1996  
202 North *et al.* 2005  
203 Phillips 2002  
204 Scholl and Taylor 2010  
205 Skinner 2002  
206 Swetnam 1993  
207 Taylor and Skinner 1998  
208 Stuart and Salazar 2000  
209 Nagel and Taylor 2005  
210 Wilken 1967  
211 Botti 1979  
212 Wills *et al.* 2005  
213 Reilly *et al.* 2004  
214 Evans *et al.* 2005  
215 Klein and Evens 2006  
216 Davis 2006  
217 Evens and Klein 2006a  
218 Evens and Klein 2006b  
219 Mensing 1992  
220 Sugihara and Reed 1987  
221 Anderson and Moratto 1996  
222 McClaran 1988  
223 Purcell and Stephens 1997  
224 Stephens 1997  
225 Agee and Biswell 1978  
226 Weisberg 2005  
227 Arno 1985\*  
228 Gruell 1997\*  
229 Bauer 2006\*  
230 Bauer and Weisberg 2009\*  
231 Jamieson 2008\*  
232 Romme *et al.* 2009  
233 Wangler and Minnich 1996  
234 Reilly *et al.* 2005b  
235 Zobel *et al.* 1982\*  
236 Agee *et al.* 1990b\*  
237 Scher and Jimerson 1989  
238 Atzet and White 2005  
239 Safford and Sherlock 2005a  
240 Safford and Sherlock 2005b  
241 Barbour and Minnich 2000  
242 Chappell and Agee 1996\*  
243 Bancroft 1979  
244 Atzet and McCrimmon 1990\*  
245 Scholl and Taylor 2006\*  
246 Foster 1998\*  
247 Taylor 1993  
248 Taylor and Halpern 1991  
249 Sugihara *et al.* 2005b  
250 Huff *et al.* 2005  
251 Brown and Baxter 2003  
252 Swetnam 1994  
253 Fritz 1931  
254 Hunter and Parker 1993  
255 Jacobs *et al.* 1985  
256 Norman 2007  
257 Brown and Smith 2000  
258 Provencher *et al.* 2005  
259 Brooks 2005  
260 Cable 1975  
261 Brooks *et al.* 2007\*  
262 Parminter 1991\*  
263 Norman and Taylor 2003  
264 Quinnild and Cosby 1958\*  
265 Acker *et al.* 2004  
266 Whitlock *et al.* 2008\*  
267 Teensma *et al.* 1991\*  
268 Impara 1997\*  
269 Agee 1993\*  
270 van Wagtenonk *et al.* 2005  
271 Richardson and Howell 2005  
272 Short *et al.* 2005  
273 Foster 2006b  
274 Safford *et al.* 2005  
275 McBride and Laven 1976  
276 Taylor and Beaty 2005  
277 Cope 1993  
278 Uchytel 1991  
279 Cope 1992a  
280 Cope 1992b  
281 Howard 1999  
282 Johnson 2000  
283 Tirmenstein 1999  
284 Steinberg 2002  
285 Sibold *et al.* 2006\*  
286 Veblen *et al.* 1994\*  
287 Buechling and Baker 2001\*  
288 Donnegan *et al.* 2001\*  
289 Kipfmüller and Baker 2000\*  
290 Suffling 1993\*  
291 Romme and Knight 1981\*  
292 Millspaugh and Whitlock 2003\*  
293 Brunelle and Whitlock 2003\*  
294 Brunelle *et al.* 2005\*  
295 Gavin *et al.* 2006\*  
296 Hallet and Hills 2006\*  
297 Brown *et al.* 1994\*  
298 Howard 2002

(yellow pine) to 610 yr (desert mixed shrub), minimum FRIs ranging from 5 yr (bigcone Douglas-fir, California juniper, dry mixed conifer, moist mixed conifer, oak woodland, and yellow pine) to 190 yr (shore pine), and maximum FRIs ranging from 40 yr (yellow pine) to 1440 yr (desert mixed shrub) (Table 2). There was also a great deal of variability within PFRs, as evidenced by differences between minimum and maximum FRIs ranging from 32 yr and 34 yr (montane chaparral and yellow pine, respectively) to 1324 yr (desert mixed shrub). FRI distributions ranged from unskewed distributions with little difference between mean and median FRIs (aspen, bigcone Douglas-fir, dry mixed conifer, lodgepole pine, montane chaparral, oak woodland, subalpine forest), to highly skewed distributions dominated by relatively short FRIs (coastal sage scrub), to highly skewed distributions domi-

nated by relatively long FRIs (pinyon-juniper). Figure 1 graphically depicts the mean, median, mean minimum, and mean maximum FRIs for the 11 most widely distributed PFRs on Forest Service lands in California.

## DISCUSSION

Our summary of California's presettlement fire regimes should be a useful reference for scientists and resource managers, whether they are seeking a general estimate of the central tendency and variability of FRIs in a broadly defined vegetation type, background information for a planned restoration project or a mechanistic model of vegetation-fire interactions, or a list of literature pertaining to a specific vegetation type or geographic location. A high degree of confidence can be placed in the validity of the FRI values for most conifer



**Figure 1.** Fire return intervals (FRI) for the 11 most widely distributed presettlement fire regime groups in California. Solid line is mean FRI, dotted line is mean median FRI, bottom of each bar is mean minimum FRI, top of each bar is mean maximum FRI.

PFRs, especially in the Sierra Nevada, due to the abundance of published dendrochronological studies. Less confidence is afforded to the FRI values of PFRs for which presettlement fire history is less well-studied, such as California juniper, desert mixed shrub, semi-desert chaparral, and silver sagebrush. For shrub-dominated PFRs in which presettlement fires are difficult to detect due to a lack of dendrochronological evidence, FRI values were derived from other types of data that may be less precise, such as charcoal in sediment cores, modeling, and expert quantitative evidence.

More research is needed in PFRs that currently have little quantitative fire history data available for California (see Table 2), or have high geographic variability in FRI. The difficulties associated with obtaining high-resolution presettlement FRI data in shrub-dominated vegetation types categorically necessitates further study in most of these PFRs (e.g., big sagebrush, black and low sagebrush, chaparral, coastal sage scrub, curl-leaf mountain mahogany, desert mixed shrub, montane chaparral, semi-desert chaparral, silver sagebrush), and perhaps innovation of new or adaptation of ex-

isting fire history techniques. Similarly, PFRs dominated by tree species that are easily killed by fire (California juniper, coastal fir, fire sensitive spruce or fir, pinyon-juniper, shore pine, spruce-hemlock) require further study and application of techniques other than fire scar studies. The PFRs of limited geographical distribution in California (bigcone Douglas-fir, coastal fir, fire sensitive spruce or fir, Port Orford cedar, shore pine, spruce-hemlock, western white pine) are chronically understudied. Other PFRs (shore pine, desert mixed shrub, spruce-hemlock, California juniper, coastal fir, pinyon-juniper, western white pine, subalpine forest) are characterized by high geographic variability in fire frequency (high standard error of FRI statistics), requiring scientists and managers to carefully search for literature from local or similar areas.

Several interesting patterns in FRIs within and among different PFRs emerged from the body of fire history literature assessed for this article. For example, analyses of the correlation between fire scar sampling area and fire return interval revealed no trend of decreasing FRI with increasing sampling area for all PFRs pooled and most PFRs individually. Sampling area was significantly correlated with mean minimum FRI for the big sagebrush ( $r = 0.867$ ,  $P = 0.012$ ), Port Orford cedar ( $r = -0.974$ ,  $P = 0.026$ ), and red fir ( $r = 0.742$ ,  $P = 0.014$ ) PFRs. The trend of decreasing FRI with increasing sampling area for the Port Orford cedar PFR was consistent with established expectations (Baker and Ehle 2001, Swetnam and Baisan 2003), while the opposite trend for the big sagebrush and red fir PFRs may be indicative of the long minimum return interval, mixed severity, and stand replacement fire regimes that typify these vegetation types (Sugihara *et al.* 2006).

Ignitions by indigenous peoples were likely a large component of the presettlement fire record in some PFRs, such as redwood (Greenlee and Langenheim 1990) and oak woodland, and are difficult or impossible to definitively

differentiate from lightning ignitions, although fire cause may be inferred from seasonality in some cases (Anderson and Moratto 1996). Some vegetation types in certain areas were probably maintained mostly by presettlement anthropogenic fire regimes, which may have resulted in vegetation type conversions in some parts of the landscape prior to Euro-American arrival. Widespread indigenous ignitions were probably uncommon in other PFRs, however, such as subalpine forest and desert mixed shrub (Anderson 2005). Regardless, no attempt is made in this assessment to differentiate between lightning and indigenous ignitions.

This paper provides background information for the FRID mapping products developed by the Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region Ecology Program and Remote Sensing Lab (Safford *et al.* 2011; available at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/rsl/clearinghouse/r5gis/frid/>). These annually updated maps provide information on geographic distribution of PFRs, and a number of different FRID statistics calculated using the California fire perimeters database (available at: <http://www.frap.cdf.ca.gov/data/frapgisdata/select.asp>). These map layers are useful for land and resource planning and assessment, as well as other natural resource applications such as fuels treatment planning, postfire restoration project design, management response to fire, and general ecological understanding of the historical and current occurrence of fire on the California national forests and neighboring jurisdictions.

Our process necessarily generalized across scales of both space and time. In general, and assuming all else is equal, areas with higher precipitation or less ignition within a given PFR would be expected to burn less often than drier areas with an ignition source (Agee 1993, Sugihara *et al.* 2006). A PFR in northwestern California therefore might be expected to support somewhat longer fire return intervals than the same PFR in southern California. A solution for this may be to use the median fire fre-

quency as the preferred measure of central tendency for PFRs in parts of their range where vegetation is relatively more flammable, and the mean fire frequency where vegetation is relatively less flammable (at least where the median is shorter than the mean, which is the typical case). Patch sizes can also influence fire frequency, with small patches of mesic vegetation embedded in a matrix of drier vegetation having shorter fire return intervals than large patches of mesic vegetation, and vice-versa (Agee *et al.* 1990a). Obviously, where higher local accuracy is required, the reader should consult the primary literature (e.g., see the citations supporting Table 2).

Temporally, changes in vegetation on California landscapes since the middle of the nineteenth century can make comparisons between historical and contemporary conditions difficult. A good example is provided by the geographic distribution of the yellow pine PFR, which is dominated by ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa* C. Lawson) and Jeffrey pine (*P. jeffreyi* Balf.). The Forest Service mapped vegetation on about 60% of its California lands in the 1930s (Wieslander 1935). Modern vegetation mapping can be generalized to the same polygon resolution and compared with the 1930s maps to get a broad idea of landscape-level vegetation changes. After >75 years of fire exclusion, logging, and other anthropogenic change, the area occupied by the yellow pine PFR appears to have decreased by about two thirds in the central Sierra Nevada, with about two thirds of the loss due to infilling by shade-tolerant (mostly fire-intolerant) conifer species, for example from the genus *Abies* (Thorne

*et al.* 2008; J. Thorne, University of California, Davis, USA, and H. Safford, USDA Forest Service, Vallejo, California, USA, unpublished data). The FRID mapping is often based on contemporary vegetation data, and these sorts of temporal changes cannot be properly accounted for. After completion of digitization of the 1930s vegetation maps, we hope to use them (where they are available) to update the geographic distribution of PFRs to allow a more accurate assessment of changes in fire frequency.

Although this study presents summarized estimates of presettlement fire frequency, it does not imply that contemporary fire should necessarily be applied at historical intervals, which may be neither feasible nor desirable in the context of altered anthropogenic influences and climatic conditions (Anderson and Moratto 1996; Millar *et al.* 2007; Wiens *et al.*, in press). Instead, the estimated presettlement FRIs are intended to serve as an assessment tool for comparison with current fire regimes and trends in those regimes, and to provide general guidelines for ecological restoration (or realignment) in vegetation types that are currently in jeopardy of type conversion due to fire frequencies that are outside the historical range of variation. In order to promote ecosystem resilience in the face of climate change and other uncertainties, efforts to restore fire to ecosystems should focus on the variability of fire frequencies (and other characteristics of the fire regime) that historically facilitated resilience, rather than applying fire to an ecosystem precisely at the mean or median interval.

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