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**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

**Before the United States House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Oversight and Reform**  
**Subcommittee on Environment**

**Courage Under Fire: Examining Government Preparedness and**  
**Response to Wildfires in California**

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Chairman Rouda, Ranking Member Comer, and members of the Subcommittee on Environment, thank you for inviting Cal OES to testify once again on the recovery from the devastating 2017 and 2018 wildfire seasons and ongoing emergency preparedness efforts to safeguard California. This testimony will focus on the lessons learned in response to and recovery from the 2017 and 2018 fire seasons, in addition to foreseen challenges that will complicate future efforts.

Since last submitting testimony to this subcommittee in June, California has experienced two large (7.1 and 6.4 magnitude) earthquakes in Ridgecrest that were felt by millions across the state. Even with this new incident and a presidentially declared disaster, the state's wildfire preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation efforts have not faltered. California continues to prepare for another wildfire season through the enhancement of firefighting capabilities and aggressive vegetation and fire fuel mitigation efforts in high severity fire zones while continuing to support the recovery efforts of multiple local communities impacted by the 2017 and 18 catastrophic wildfires.

### **Wildfire Preparedness**

Climate change continues to act as a force-multiplier when it comes to wildfires and their destruction. It is important to note that ten of the state's 20 most destructive wildfires have occurred just since 2015. Climate change factors have driven the extensive, erratic and rapid spread of wildfire. This trend is expected to continue with the estimated burn area for fires to increase by 77% by the year 2100.

This year, Governor Newsom and the California Legislature acted quickly to create a legislative package to further prepare the state with primary efforts designed to:

- increase situational awareness through better Alert and Warning capabilities; enhance implementation of Next Generation 911 to
- modernize the state 911 system;
- strengthen codes and regulatory oversight;
- Increase preparedness efforts across the state, particularly in vulnerable communities;
- increase firefighting capabilities through more equipment and personnel,
- focus utility preparedness and risk mitigation efforts; and to
- buy down the risk of wildfires by accelerating multiple projects to create defensible spaces in high severity fire zones.

Assembly Bill 1054 and Senate Bill 111 have both addressed the safety, accountability, and stability for the residents, businesses, and utilities of California through novel requirements and policies. The rules include many enhancements to existing rules and regulatory bodies, including increasing the penalty authority of the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) and establishing a Wildfire Safety Advisory Board to advise and make recommendations to the CPUC.

These bills also establish new and innovative policies that will increase the responsibility of investor-owned utilities in safeguarding against wildfires. The overall direction to the IOUs was to better protect infrastructure and mitigate the possibility of fire starts. As a result, the IOUs have instituted the Public Safety Power Shutoff Program. This Program is implemented by the utilities when conditions indicate a high probability for fire, such as during a “red flag” warning situation. Cal OES along with Cal Fire are working with the IOUs to refine public education, enhance overall preparedness planning efforts and streamline the notification process to local governments and to the public.

In addition, as part of the States Fire Mutual Aid response capability, Cal OES, Cal Fire, the US Forest Service, the USDA along with Local Government have jointly come to terms regarding the current interpretation and implementation of the 2019 CA Fire Assistance Agreement that provides for reimbursement to state and local fire responders. This agreement is a critical component to ensure that the capacity of local and state fire mutual aid assets that respond to wildfires at the request of the federal government remain in place and are reimbursed in a timely and efficient manner.

### **California for All Emergency Preparedness Campaign**

Assembly Bill 72 appropriated \$20 million to award grants to community-based organizations to conduct outreach on emergency preparedness and provide resources for California's most vulnerable populations. Cal OES, partnering with CalVolunteers, created three grant programs that support all 58 counties in California. These programs work to develop awareness, education, and training programs addressing vulnerable populations, as well as expands an emergency animal sheltering preparedness project from the California Veterinary Medical Foundation. *California for All*, and its implementation by Cal OES and CalVolunteers, is imperative in ensuring equal access to information and services during emergencies.

### **Next Generation 9-1-1 and Resiliency of Telecommunications**

Cal OES has continued working on its legislatively mandated implementation of Next Generation 9-1-1. Through a developed strategic plan, Cal OES issued a

request for proposals and will announce on August 20, 2019 the vendors selected to implement the Next Generation 9-1-1 solution. Multiple vendors will be selected to ensure a reliable, diversified, and scalable solution for California. This effort will modernize 9-1-1 systems and better enable California to assist those in need during disasters. The features, designed to protect and save lives, improve 9-1-1 systems interoperability throughout California, reduce system downtime and outages, and will enable the system to be used as a common delivery tool for alerts and warnings. To improve the resiliency of wireless infrastructure sites, California Congresswoman Anna Eshoo introduced H.R. 3836, which amends the Federal Communications Act to include public safety requirements in the terms and conditions States may require of wireless service providers. Currently, 15 members of the California Congressional Delegation are signed on as co-sponsors. If implemented, this vital legislation will enable California to increase infrastructure resiliency and hardening requirements in wireless communications hardware and improve emergency communications reliability during disasters.

### **Debris Management**

A top priority during both the 2017 and 18 wildfire recovery efforts remains the facilitation of rapid debris removal operations. Without a successful and rapid debris removal program, communities would be unable to start to rebuild, amplifying public health and safety issues and stalling both individual and community economic recovery.

Private property debris removal on this scale is a new process in California. Following the 2017 wildfires, California sought the assistance from the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) through FEMA to clear debris in Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino and Lake Counties. Since then, Cal OES has moved rapidly to build capabilities within the State and have adapted best practices from the lessons learned in 2017 to better oversee and effectively facilitate state-managed debris removal with efficiency and accountability.

Following the 2018 wildfires, Cal OES undertook multiple large-scale debris removal operations in both Los Angeles/Ventura Counties in the south and Siskiyou, Shasta and Butte Counties in the north. Removal of debris from the Hill and Woolsey fires was completed during the final week of July 2019. A total of 422,229 tons of debris was removed from those burn areas. The Camp Fire debris removal program in Butte County with more than 15000 destroyed structures is now roughly 85% complete. Both projects have been efficient and have exceeded metrics and timelines initially set.

### **Individual Assistance (IA)**

In addition, throughout the 2017 and 2018 wildfire recovery efforts, assistance to individuals has been the other top priority. Throughout this process, FEMA has been very helpful providing Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA) and temporary housing solutions for several thousand individuals and families. The Team at FEMA Region 9 have consistently been great partners and solution oriented. However, IA programs continue to remain a complicated challenge. Catastrophic events like the recent wildfires severely disrupt lives and businesses and the federal IA programs are essential for helping individuals and the community begin the recovery process.

Recently however, FEMA issued new guidelines and declaration factors for obtaining an Individual Assistance (IA) designation. While we are still evaluating these new factors, our initial analysis indicates that they may result in a negative impact to California, making it harder to obtain IA and the ability to recover from future disasters. The new factors take into account several new indicators in determining if the event will qualify for IA including:

- the state's fiscal capacity;
- The state's total taxable resources;
- gross domestic product;
- non-profit capacity, and
- the per capita income of the local area.

States, such as California, with large and extremely diverse populations and large taxable baselines appear to be penalized, as there will be an assumption that the State has the fiscal capacity to handle the impacts of the event with its own resources. We believe these changes would now require the State to demonstrate at least twice as much eligible damage before IA support would be granted. Time will tell how these new factors will be interpreted and applied.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on very these important topics, and for your continued support. California is committed to developing and promoting innovative prevention and mitigation initiatives in wildfire management throughout the state. However, these initiatives, programs and policies cannot succeed in a vacuum. They will require the whole of community participation and support from every level of government to reduce the threat of devastating wildfires, protect lives and property and build a more resilient California.