

Opening Statement
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Energy and Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change
Hearing on “Out of Control: The Impact of Wildfires on our Power Sector and the Environment”
January 28, 2020

This is an important hearing today as we examine the impact of wildfires on our energy infrastructure and the environment. Wildfires are becoming more frequent, more dangerous, and more destructive due to the impacts of climate change.

It is not only the United States that is affected by these fires. Catastrophic wildfires continue to rage in Australia, claiming lives and property and decimating unique wildlife and habitats. The costs of these events are tremendous, and they continue to rise.

Fire is and has been part of the lifecycle of many ecosystems. But inadequate management, coupled with the expansion of communities and infrastructure into fire-prone areas, have increased fire risks. Failure to address these risks is contributing to more wildfires getting started. And when they do start, climate change – and the extended droughts and high temperatures associated with it – results in fires that burn hotter over more extensive areas.

Since the 1970s, the average annual number of large wildfires in the western United States has tripled and the area burned is six times greater. Last year, nearly 50,000 wildfires burned nearly 4.6 million acres throughout the United States. These wildfires are particularly destructive in the western states, and California has borne the brunt of the damage and devastation over the last several years.

While climate change is making wildfires more severe and more frequent, most wildfires in the United States are caused by human activity. The 2018 Camp Fire in California was the deadliest wildfire in nearly a century. It was started by transmission lines owned by PG&E.

Clearly, electric utilities must do more to ensure their systems are modernized and maintained to prevent sparking wildfires. The safety of the communities they serve depends upon responsible equipment management and maintenance. And when more drastic preventive measures must be taken – such as the planned power shutoffs that affected millions of PG&E customers last year – utilities must minimize the impact on customers in areas without power.

We must reduce fire risks associated with infrastructure located in fire-prone areas. We must do a better job of habitat management. And we must address climate change to avoid ever-worsening droughts and elevated temperatures that intensify fires once they start. This is critical because the Fourth National Climate Assessment projects that the frequency of wildfires could increase by 25 percent, and the number of very large fires could triple, if we don't act.

The devastation and suffering caused by wildfires can only be curtailed by moving forward with an array of policies to accomplish these goals – there is no singular solution to this problem. We must act.