

Opening Statement of Republican Leader John Shimkus
Joint Subcommittee Hearing
“Out of Control: The Impact of Wildfires on Our Power Sector and Environment”
January 28, 2020

As Prepared for Delivery

Today’s hearing will review the risks and harms of wildfires and what may be done to address these risks. The general focus concerns the role of the electric power infrastructure, which has been linked to destructive fires, especially in California in recent years.

Orienting our focus around the power sector should be useful for the Subcommittees, both from the energy and environment policy perspectives. It should help inform a better understanding of what it takes to reduce wildfire risks and improve the resilience when wildfire risks are especially high—as has been the case in California and the Pacific Northwest for a number of years now.

It also should help us focus on future risks in a practical way. When we talk about addressing long term climate risks, for example, a big part of the discussion must involve what is needed to provide for the adaptive capacity of communities to reduce, respond, and recover from impacts of those risks.

Part of this capacity involves ensuring the economic wherewithal of communities to respond to risks. Another part involves ensuring

effective information and permitting for timely decisions that enable for cost-effective, resilient infrastructure.

Overall, adaptive capacity is about flexibility to respond to risks, whatever they may be. I understand, for example, that one of the benefits of the PG&E's exercising the communications and outreach during its power outages has been to better prepare the communication and response for catastrophic events like earthquakes.

During the 115th Congress, I chaired two subcommittee hearings on wildfires. We examined the air quality impacts of wildfires, with a focus on stake holder perspectives. We also examined the mitigation and management strategies for reducing air quality risks from wildfire smoke.

Generally, these strategies involved efforts to reduce the intensity and frequency of wildfires that threaten communities. The strategies also involve managing the inevitable smoke impacts, whether from wildfires or from what is known as prescribed burning. And they involve ensuring that effective actions are credited appropriately in air quality planning, air quality monitoring, and compliance activities, so states and localities are not punished for taking action that will improve public health.

The EPA has issued guidance over the past year aiming to reduce penalties for prescribed burns and wildfires, but this process requires significant coordination, planning and approvals. More may be done in terms of the agency recognizing large regional fire events that impact multiple states. It's bad enough for communities to experience choking wildfire smoke, but for states to be further penalized for these exceptional events does not make sense.

Today's hearing should provide additional perspective to help understand the importance of these strategies to the larger goal of reducing the harmful impacts of wildfires. Additional information on the value of preventive measures such as prescribed burns, mechanical thinning and related practices would be useful today.

Two of our witnesses today, Dr. Brandon Collins and Dr. Anthony Davis, can talk about the value of these practices from their field work in California and the Pacific Northwest.

During the past two wildfire hearings, we learned about the experience in the eastern United States which has a long culture of more active fire management than in the west. There are many reasons for

this, some involving topography and other unique factors of the west, but the underlying fact is that more can be done today to reduce risks.

It will also be useful to examine the measures most necessary to respond and recover from wildfire events. For electric providers, the most pressing issues concern restoration of power (or ensuring communities have the electricity when they most need it) and increasing their technological ability to ensure reliability during hazard events.

For federal and state policymakers there is also the need to ensure forests recover and are resilient to inevitable fire events and other hazards. Having basic facts on this can go a long way to improving our energy, environmental and public health policies.

Let me welcome the panelists. I look forward to understanding the challenges and opportunities you face, and what we can do to ensure our policies accommodate what is necessary to reduce the risks and ensure adaptive capacity of communities going forward.

Thank you.