

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

As Prepared for Delivery

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding today’s hearing to examine the impact of the recent wildfires and discuss ways to improve forest management and maintain electrical equipment to prevent fires and reduce risks to human health and the environment.

There is no question that the biggest driver of the recent wildfires is decades of mismanagement of our nation’s forests. Yes, climate change is playing a role, but the evidence suggests that our direct impact to the land and the way we manage our forests has much more to do with the situation we are facing today.

I plan to use today’s hearing to discuss what we can do to improve forest conditions, prevent sparks on electrical lines, remove brush and trees from utility corridors, and strengthen planning and preparedness as the State and local level.

Wildfires are not a new phenomenon. Before the pioneers settled the West, wildfires were much more widespread, and they burned many more acres than they burn today. However, today’s wildfires are

burning hotter and with more intensity as a result of decades of fire suppression and the buildup of brush and dead trees.

With population growth and urban sprawl, more people than ever before, especially in the West, are living in wilderness areas that are prone to wildfires. I look forward to hearing from our forestry experts, Dr. Collins and Dr. Davis, to expand on the trends influencing wildfires and share suggestions to improve forest conditions and reduce the risk of fires. There are many steps we can take immediately – including thinning of brush, prescribed burns, and allowing some wildfires to run their course naturally.

As we know from some of our prior hearings on wildfires, these issues are particularly acute in California and Oregon, which have both suffered devastating wildfires in recent years. I look forward to hearing from Mr. Johnson and Mr. Markham about what utilities can do to manage hazard trees on their rights-of-way and maintain their equipment to prevent sparks.

I am also interested to learn more about how utilities can improve preparation with more accurate forecasting, more proactive maintenance and tree clearing, and more sensors and automated equipment to improve visibility on their systems. There is a big role for technology

here, so we need to be thinking about how to innovate and drive these new ideas into practice.

Members of this Committee are also interested to gather lessons-learned on the regulatory side, especially at the State level. If there are permitting challenges that prevents utilities from clearing hazard trees, we should address them. Much of the focus of today's hearing will be on California, and the challenges they are experiencing with their electric utilities.

While the fires themselves are devastating, millions of residents in California have also been suffering through "public safety power shutoffs" in attempt to prevent wildfires from being started by electrical equipment during strong winds and dry weather. These blackouts have resulted in cascading effects, causing widespread interruptions affecting public safety, healthcare, transportation, and other government services.

These proactive blackouts are simply not sustainable. It is crazy to imagine living in a modern society where one must constantly worry about whether the lights are going to come on or whether the freezer defrost, let alone worry about whether 911 is going to work in an emergency.

The bottom line is that we need to make sure our utilities and government regulators are taking an “all hazards” approach. Now, more than ever, we should be focused on grid reliability and resilience. I believe we should treat wildfires like severe weather and cyber-attacks. We need to be laser focused on the threat, and make sure we have tools in place across the board to protect, respond, and recover to wildfires when they occur.

With that, I look forward to today’s testimony and continuing the conversation with my colleagues about some legislative solutions. I would note that we have several bills addressing grid reliability and pipeline security, which would strengthen the Department of Energy’s ability to respond to natural disasters like wildfires. I hope to get those bills to the floor soon, but they are one of many steps we can take.

Thank you, I yield back.