



SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT

157 W 5th Street, 2nd Floor • San Bernardino, CA 92415-0451 • (909) 387-5974 • Fax (909) 387-5542

Testimony in Support of H.R. 6994 “Restoring Our Unopened Trails for Enjoyment and Safety (ROUTES) Act” January 31, 2024

I am the Dan Munsey, the Fire Chief and Fire Warden for San Bernardino County Fire Protection District. I am here today in response to the Committee’s invitation to testify in support of H.R. 6994. I have 28 years of experience in the fire service, and for the last four years I have served as the fire chief of the largest fire district in our nation. I have served with Federal Incident Management Teams for over two decades facing some of the most complex emergency incidents in history. Incidents that have killed firefighters, civilians, and caused massive losses to public infrastructure. I serve as a director on FIRESCOPE, a board that provides recommendations and technical assistance to the fire service including the FIRESCOPE Incident Command System (ICS) and the Multi-Agency Coordination System. I am also the vice-president of the California Metro Chief Association, an association that is inclusive of the largest fire departments in the nation.

I want to thank our Congresswoman, Young Kim, along with Congressman Doug LaMalfa for introducing this act. This bill would benefit us by allowing improved maintenance on roads and trail networks used by our firefighters and by restoring public land in ways to prevent secondary emergencies.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Col. Paul Cook (Ret.)
Vice Chairman, First District

Jesse Armendarez
Second District

Dawn Rowe
Chair, Third District

Curt Hagman
Fourth District

Joe Baca, Jr.
Fifth District

Luther Snoke
Chief Executive Officer

San Bernardino is the largest county in the continental United States, with a land mass of almost 20,000 square miles, larger than New Jersey, Connecticut, Delaware, and Rhode Island put together. The County is a diverse geographical region with large coastal valleys, mountainous terrain, and expansive desert areas. San Bernardino County is home to two of the most populated and recreated national forests, the Angeles National Forest, and the San Bernardino National Forest. Almost 80% of the county's land mass is made up of federal lands. The 2.2 million citizens we serve in sixty-six communities are often largely isolated and surrounded by federal land, both mountain and desert areas. This means that San Bernardino County Fire is often impacted by all-hazard emergencies, such as wildfires, originating on federal lands.

San Bernardino County has a history of large-scale destructive wildfires and natural disasters that pose significant challenges for our responders. This includes the largest fire in California last year, the York Fire, 2003's Old Fire/Grand Prix Fire that destroyed 993 homes and caused six civilian deaths; and the 2020 El Dorado Fire which resulted in a federal firefighter fatality.

Each of these fires, like so many others throughout our nation, have resulted in damaged roads, trails, campgrounds, and other infrastructure. The ROUTES Act would require these areas to be restored and reopened. This infrastructure's restoration is important to the local community, not only for recreation, but for firefighting. Many of the fires fought in our federal lands burn in areas that had previously burned where infrastructure has been damaged and not restored or reopened.

A lot of the same roads used for recreation are used for firefighting. In my ten years commanding geographical areas of wildfires as a division supervisor or operations, I spent many days "opening" roads, which means repairing previously damaged roads, to the point that they could be used to

transport firefighters, fire engines, and heavy equipment like bulldozers. In areas where vegetation has been burned, roads are often blocked by debris flow, such as rocks, boulders, and large dead trees caused by water running off slopes following the first few rain storms after the fire; this has resulted in delays to being able to effectively respond and mitigate fires.

Debris flows are common examples of “secondary incidents”, or an incident that is related to the initial incident. It is imperative that restorative efforts be undertaken to minimize or prevent secondary incidents from occurring. A good example occurred in the Forest Falls, California community after the El Dorado Fire (2020). Our wildland crews worked to remove over sixty-tons of debris from natural flood channels to prevent blockage; blockage often prevents the natural flow of water causing additional damage to roads and our communities. Despite this, debris and flooding in this community has occurred numerous times. In September 2022, several houses were destroyed and an elderly resident perished as debris overtook her home. In August 2023, a similar incident occurred in the nearby community of Seven-Oaks causing an elderly resident to be swept away in flood waters and die. The County and private citizens work hard to reopen roads ways in our communities. But this is not always the case on federal land.

It has been frustrating to watch fires get larger as we often worked for days to open federal roads to allow firefighters and firefighting equipment access to the perimeter of fire. These roads are often left unrepaired or abandoned for many years resulting in massive amount of heavy equipment work to make them usable. Campgrounds are important too as they are often used as incident bases and areas of refuge. Without campgrounds, crews are forced to drive further to areas that can be used for sleeping, feeding, and other logistical needs. Likewise, existing trail networks are used

for crews to make access to and from remote areas. Without these trails, crews must take time to scout and create new trails. Fires often leave behind hazardous trees. Hazardous trees are those trees that are dead or dying and can fall at any moment to block roads, trails, strike humans, vehicles, and other objects. They must be removed to allow public and infrastructure safety.

Failure to maintain, reopen, and restore these areas affects our local communities. Your local fire departments are often the first arriving firefighters on federal incidents. This has always occurred “after hours” when federal forestry technicians are not in their fire stations or during the “off season” when many of these employees have been laid-off for the season. In today’s federal forestry worker shortage, this is occurring more and more often. When our local firefighters are delayed due to poor road conditions, fires grow larger, causing large threats to our communities.

Even after the fire, unmaintained roadways can cause difficulties. During a large February 2023 snowstorm, several cell phone towers used by the public to access services including 911 services lost electrical power. San Bernardino County Sheriff and County Fire District crews had to use helicopters to fly fuel into these critical cell phone sites due to federal roads that were impassable due to lack of regular maintenance and repair. We could not even use tracked snow vehicles (snow cats) to maneuver the roads.

++

In closing, San Bernardino County Fire protects sixty-six communities often threatened by emergency incidents occurred on federal lands. These communities, and many others across the United States, face threats originating on federal land, including fires and flooding. Our firefighters respond through mutual and automatic aid to suppress wildfires and respond to other emergencies on federal land, but we must be able to access the areas where these emergencies are located. It is important to ensure that secondary emergencies are a minimized or prevented, this

includes removing hazardous trees and taking other mitigation efforts to prevent or minimize additional disasters such as flooding. This Act is important to allow that our public lands are restored and reopened which is critical to the safety of our communities.

I encourage the Committee to act favorably on H.R. 6994. Thank you for your time and consideration.

I am available to answer any questions you may have.

Mr. Dan Munsey

Fire Chief/Fire Warden

San Bernardino County Fire Protection District