

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, thank you for inviting me to testify today on H.R. 4038, the Wildfire Response and Preparedness Act of 2025. My name is Patrick J. Russell, 18<sup>th</sup> Fire Chief for Anaheim Fire & Rescue.

Leading the largest municipal fire department in Orange County. With nearly four decades of public service, I oversee a department of 369 personnel and a \$180 million budget supporting fire, rescue, and emergency medical services for more than 360,000 residents and approximately 25 million visitors each year.

I have more than 40 years of fire service experience spanning both operational leadership and executive administration, and have maintained an ISO Class I rating, reflecting the highest standards of fire protection and emergency response.

In addition, I have spent 25 years serving on federal Type I Incident Management Teams, holding qualifications as an Incident Commander, Safety Officer, Operations Section Chief, Branch Director, Division/Group Supervisor, Strike Team Leader, Task Force Leader, Structure Protection Specialist, and Incident Command System Peer Review Evaluator.

At the regional level, I currently serve as an Incident Commander with the Orange County All-Risk Incident Management Team and as a member of the FIRESCOPE Leadership Board of Directors, where I help guide statewide coordination, firefighter safety, and large-scale incident response strategy.

This breadth of experience has made one trend unmistakably clear. Wildfires are not occasional challenges for us; they are a consistent and escalating reality we face year after year.

Wildfires are not occasional challenges for us; they are a consistent and escalating reality we face year after year. Unlike many other emergencies, wildfires can be either natural or human-caused, often unpredictable, and capable of overwhelming entire regions in a matter of hours.

In 2025, we saw a powerful example of both progress and vulnerability across our nation. The number of wildfires impacting federal, state, and local lands did not decrease significantly. However, we experienced a dramatic decrease in total acres burned. That outcome, while encouraging, was influenced by favorable environmental conditions, reduced drought during the summer months, and an aggressive initial attack, with resources across the country.

While this was a positive year, it is essential to recognize that these conditions were not the result of systematic change; they were the result of circumstance. And circumstances will

not always be in our favor. Early indications suggest the 2026 fire season will be more active than last year's.

At Anaheim Fire & Rescue, we are proud of our wildfire response capabilities, but we do not operate alone. We rely heavily on our federal and state partners to ensure a strong, unified response, especially during initial attack, when minutes matter most.

When federal resources are unable to respond promptly, the consequences are significant. Delays in the initial attack increase the likelihood that a small, manageable fire will escalate into a critical, catastrophic incident. In those moments, local and state agencies are forced to supplement with additional resources or draw from neighboring jurisdictions, which reduces overall system capacity and increases response times for all types of emergencies, not just wildfires.

This creates a cascading effect:

- Local and state resources become overextended.
- Response times increase.
- Firefighter safety is compromised.
- Civilian lives and property are placed at greater risk.

### **A Problem That Remains Unaddressed**

One of the most pressing issues we face is when federal resources fail to provide an adequate, timely initial attack response; the burden falls disproportionately on state and local agencies.

This is not sustainable.

Wildfire response must always be a coordinated, unified effort among federal, state, and local partners. But coordination cannot succeed if one level of government is consistently under-resourced or unable to meet response demands. The result is not shared responsibility – it is unequal strain.

If this proposed legislation passes and establishes a defined response workload and performance framework, it would significantly reduce the burden placed on state and local agencies. More importantly, it would strengthen the entire wildfire response system by ensuring that no single level of government carries the weight alone.

## **Why Initial Attack Matters**

There is a well-established principle in wildfire management:  
Our highest probability of success comes from a rapid, well-resourced initial attack.

Early containment protects firefighters, saves lives, preserves property, and values risk. It also greatly reduces suppression costs, thus more efficiently using our taxpayer dollars. As with any emergency, response time and resource availability are the two most critical factors. Whether it is a structure fire, a medical emergency, or a wildland fire, the longer it takes to assemble adequate resources, the more dangerous and destructive the incident becomes.

When the response is delayed:

- Fire behavior escalates.
- Risk to firefighters increases.
- Property loss, threats increase.
- Civilian lives are placed in jeopardy.
- Critical infrastructure and cultural values.

## **The Need for Standards, Staffing, and Systems Reform**

While I cannot speak to specific performance metrics today, I strongly recommend that all federally managed wildfire responses be guided by clear performance indicators, particularly for initial attack response time and resource availability.

We also need to modernize and strengthen the systems that support wildfire response nationwide.

Recent discussions in FIRESCOPE following the 2025 fire season highlighted the urgent need to revamp the Interagency Resource Ordering Capability (IROC). All available resources – local, state, federal, and private contractors must be visible and accurate in one unified system so they can be identified and deployed without delay.

Equally important is dispatch capacity. During periods of elevated fire risk, dispatch centers must operate with full 24-hour staffing, rather than relying on the on-call models that delay critical response actions. Too often, time-sensitive resource requests are deferred overnight due to limited staffing, creating avoidable gaps in initial attack capability. Wildfires do not operate on business hours, and our response systems must reflect that reality.

We must also ensure the Geographic Area Coordinators (GACs) are adequately staffed across the country, with hours and authority aligned with real-time wildfire risk. Faster processing means faster response.

## **Year-Round Readiness Must Be the Standard**

Wildfire risk is no longer seasonal- it is year-round in many parts of the country. Yet federal staffing models still reflect outdated assumptions.

Year-round, we must operate at maximum readiness. However, too often national fire management systems rely on the limited staffing outside of their Maximum Availability Period (MAP), and on-call resources. When IROC notifications are missed, and orders are not processed until the next day, we lose irreplaceable time.

Federal firefighting resources, including contract firefighters, must be available year-round. Federal wildfire contracts must ensure the availability of ground resources and aerial assets that can be repositioned across the country based on fire probability, not fixed calendars.

Wildfire risk varies significantly between the East and West Coasts, requiring response strategies and resource deployment models tailored to each region's distinct conditions.

This brings me to a critical point:

Any meaningful improvement in wildfire response requires a serious review and adjustment of the federal wildfire budget.

Year-round staffing, faster dispatch operations, expanded aviation resources, and a modernized national ordering system cannot be achieved without sustained investment.

### **Final Recommendation**

I strongly recommend the development of a National Wildfire Standards of Cover framework, a system that defines:

- Minimum staffing levels.
- Ground resource requirements.
- Aerial asset availability.
- Year-round initial attack readiness.
- Regional flexibility based on fire probability.

This framework should guide resource allocation and ensure that every level of government-federal, state, and local is supported equally.

Thank you for allowing me to provide my testimony today. I look forward to answering your questions.