

Steve Crowder

Mayor

Town of Paradise, California

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Committee On Natural Resources

Subcommittee on Federal Lands

Fix our Forests: The Need for Urgent Action One Year After the L.A. Wildfires

Chair Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and to share the experience of the Town of Paradise before, during, and after the 2018 Camp Fire, as well as the resilience work we have undertaken since that day.

The Town of Paradise is located in Northern California, approximately 90 miles north of Sacramento, on a forested ridge between the Butte Creek Canyon to the west and the Feather River Canyon to the east. Prior to the Camp Fire, Paradise was home to approximately 26,500 residents and was the second-largest community in Butte County. Many of our residents worked in neighboring cities but chose Paradise for its natural beauty, cooler climate, and more affordable housing. That same geography and forested setting, however, also placed Paradise squarely within a high-risk wildland-urban interface.

I was elected to the Paradise Town Council on November 6, 2018—just two days before the Camp Fire. I had not yet been sworn in when the fire ignited on the morning of November 8th.

When I learned that a fire had started in Pulga, I immediately rushed to Town Hall to help in any way I could. Very quickly it became clear that this was not a routine wildfire. As evacuation routes became congested and conditions deteriorated, I went out into the community and began directing traffic, helping residents escape as flames advanced toward town. For hours, I remained in town, assisting evacuees and putting myself in harm's way alongside first responders and community members who refused to leave until others were safe.

Like thousands of others that day, I lost everything. My home was destroyed. My business was destroyed. But I was one of the fortunate ones—I survived. Eighty-five of our neighbors did not.

The Camp Fire became the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California history at that time. It burned more than 154,000 acres, destroyed over 14,000 homes and 5,000 businesses and other structures – 95% of the structures in Paradise. It forced the evacuation of more than 52,000 people and forever changed our community. Residents escaped through walls of flame and darkness. Some perished in their vehicles. Others fled on foot. The trauma of that day remains with our community, and it informs every decision we make as leaders.

Leading up to the Camp Fire, Northern California had experienced an historically long dry period, with more than 200 days without significant rainfall. Vegetation on both public and private land was extremely dry and overgrown. The national forests surrounding Paradise—the Plumas and Lassen National Forests—contained dense fuel loads. Within Town limits, defensible space was encouraged but difficult to enforce with limited staffing. On November 8, 2018, strong winds combined with these conditions, and when a Pacific Gas & Electric transmission line failed in Pulga, the resulting fire traveled eight miles in less than two hours, overwhelming every local defense.

In the years since the fire, Paradise has committed itself to not simply rebuilding, but rebuilding smarter, safer, and more resilient.

We have fundamentally changed how we approach wildfire preparedness and community safety. Evacuation planning has been rethought and improved, with roadway upgrades and traffic-flow improvements designed to move people out of town more efficiently during emergencies. We have invested in a modern, town-wide early warning siren system with voice capability, along with in-home alerting devices for residents who may not hear outdoor sirens, ensuring that warnings reach people quickly and clearly.

We have dramatically strengthened our defensible space program. What was once largely voluntary is now a rigorously enforced, annual inspection program covering every property in town. Compliance rates now exceed 90 percent, reducing ignition risk around homes and neighborhoods.

As we rebuild, Paradise has adopted some of the most stringent local building standards in the state. Our building codes align with the Institute for Business & Home Safety (IBHS) Wildfire Prepared Home Standard. These standards require Class-A fire-rated roofs, enclosed eaves, ignition-resistant construction materials, and a five-foot non-combustible zone around structures. These measures are science-based and proven to significantly reduce structure loss during wildfires.

In addition, Paradise has worked to achieve and expand Firewise USA® Community designations, empowering neighborhoods to take collective responsibility for fuel reduction, home hardening, and emergency preparedness. We are also creating strategic fuel-reduction buffers along the edges of town in coordination with regional partners, recognizing that wildfire does not respect jurisdictional boundaries.

Independent analysis by Milliman and CoreLogic, cited in a Bay Area Council report, has found that the combined resilience measures Paradise has adopted can reduce wildfire risk by as much as 70 percent. These are real, measurable gains—but they are only part of the solution.

Local governments can and must take responsibility for what happens within their borders. But we cannot protect our communities alone. The Camp Fire started outside of Paradise, on federal land, and was driven by fuel conditions far beyond our control.

For that reason, I want to express strong support for the Fix Our Forests legislation. Paradise's experience makes clear that proactive forest management—thinning, prescribed burns, and streamlined project delivery—is essential to protecting communities like ours. Delays, litigation risk, and insufficient scale in forest treatment place lives at risk. We need policies that prioritize fuel reduction near communities, accelerate project implementation, and treat forest health as a public safety issue.

Paradise is living proof that wildfire is no longer a theoretical risk. It is a certainty for many communities in the West. What matters now is whether we learn from these disasters and act accordingly.

On November 8, 2018, Paradise lost nearly everything—but we did not lose our resolve. Our community chose resilience. We chose to rebuild stronger. And we chose to use our experience to help prevent other communities from suffering the same fate.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our story. I look forward to your questions and to working with you to make our forests healthier and our communities safer.