



**TO:** House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands

**FROM:** John Mills, Co-founder and CEO of Watch Duty

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

**DATE:** February 3, 2026.

## **I. Introduction**

Dear Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee on Federal Lands,

My name is John Mills, and I live off-the-grid in the wildland forests of Northern California. I'm also the Cofounder and CEO of Watch Duty, a nonprofit organization that provides real-time wildfire alerts and intelligence to millions of Americans and first responders.

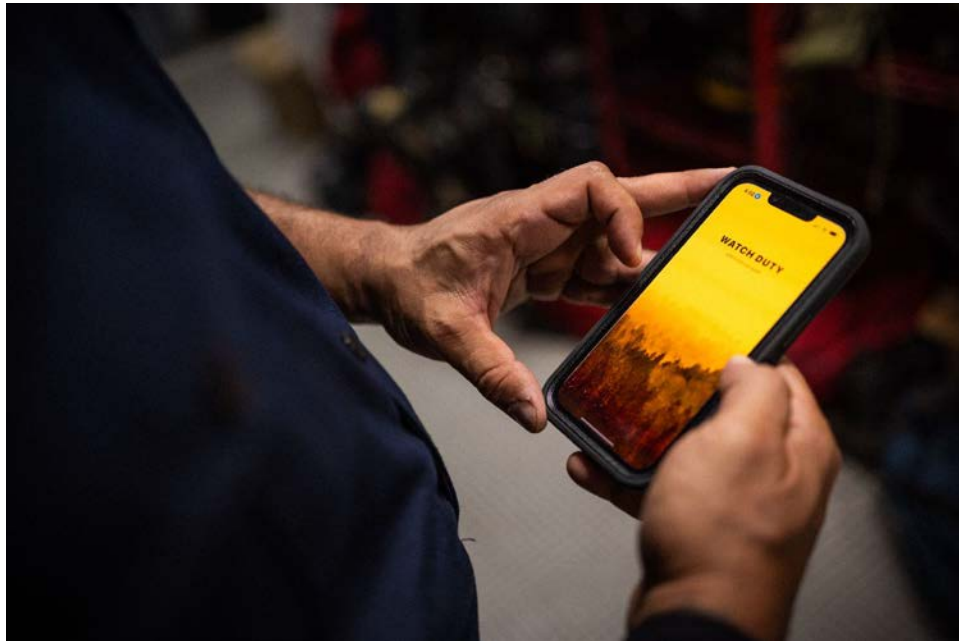
While I'm proud of what we've built, to be frank, *I shouldn't have had to build this at all.*

During the LA wildfires, Watch Duty became the most downloaded app in the country—surpassing ChatGPT and TikTok.<sup>1</sup> In just one week, 2.5MM people, one quarter of LA county, downloaded Watch Duty to find safety during their most destructive wildfires in history.

---

<sup>1</sup><https://techcrunch.com/2025/01/09/watch-duty-surpasses-chatgpt-as-top-free-app-on-app-store-as-california-fires-spread/>

# WATCH DUTY



Credit: Watch Duty



LA Emergency Operations Center during the LA Wildfire Response, January 2025, Credit: Watch Duty

Make no mistake, this is not a tech success story. This is a story of failure. As one of America's largest cities burned, both residents and first responders were unable to get the information they needed to survive. As a result, everyone turned to us for information, including emergency managers and first responders.

Our government is failing to alert people of their risk during an emergency and the consequences are deadly. The LA Fires led to the deaths of dozens of people, a tragedy that

can and should be avoided.<sup>2</sup> But simply put, *the status quo is not working*.

## II. Public Alert Systems Are Setup Wrong

Today, emergency alerts are crippled by a fragmented bureaucracy and crumbling infrastructure. Emergency managers are pushed to their limits and cannot keep up with the speed of today's wind driven fires. As a result, official warnings usually go out only after a community is on fire — houses are burning, aircraft are buzzing overhead, and people are already running for their lives.

By that point, panic has set in, which is what we just saw during the Palisades Fire when hundreds of people abandoned their cars on the road, blocking egress for residents and ingress for fire personnel. The same thing happened in Paradise, Lahaina, and Santa Rosa.<sup>3</sup> These events are not "unprecedented" anymore.



Credit: NBC News

From California to Wisconsin, Idaho to Minnesota, New Mexico to New Jersey, the frequency and intensity is increasing and not contained to the American West. Years of research, user interviews, and lived experience tell us the opposite of what our systems assume: people need early and actionable information to save lives and support first responders. Avoiding alert fatigue requires us to give people accurate and relevant information.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup><https://www.bu.edu/sph/news/articles/2025/death-count-for-2025-la-county-wildfires-likely-hundreds-higher-than-official-records-show/>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/20/us/los-angeles-wildfires-cars-transport.html> ; Image credit: Etienne Laurent/AP/FR172066 AP

<sup>4</sup><https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1468-5973.70076>



### III. What Works: Timing & Volume

The reality is: bureaucratic delays cause confusion and give room for misinformation to spread. At Watch Duty, we are experts in emergency alerting, operate centrally, and have deep understanding based on experience day in and day out for years.

Our alerts contain a storyline of events so you have context as the situation unfolds. We use verified, on-the-ground reports from first responders and emergency managers. We communicate with our users from the first spark to when the last engine leaves. We tell people how fast a fire is moving, which direction it's heading, and when it crosses containment lines. That early context—sometimes hours before officials—gives families time to prepare. That head start saves lives.

Dan Munsey, San Bernardino County Fire Chief who has testified before this Subcommittee said:

"Watch Duty centralizes information that multiple agencies rely on, so everyone starts with the same situational awareness. That shared understanding cuts down on time spent coordinating and ensures all partners are aligned. Everyone has a common operating picture—from firefighters to emergency managers to elected officials—so we're all on the same page."

### IV. What Works: Usability & Delivery Change

But timing isn't the only issue. Quality matters.

Many official alerts are hard to read, poorly formatted, and lack maps that give context. Without clear geographic information, people are forced to guess where danger is. Many government alerts say "Evacuate now" but don't tell you where to go. What roads are safe? Or give any context about the broader incident to give residents situational awareness. In the 2018 Camp Fire in Paradise, California, confusion caused residents to flee from safe areas directly into the path of the fire.<sup>5</sup>

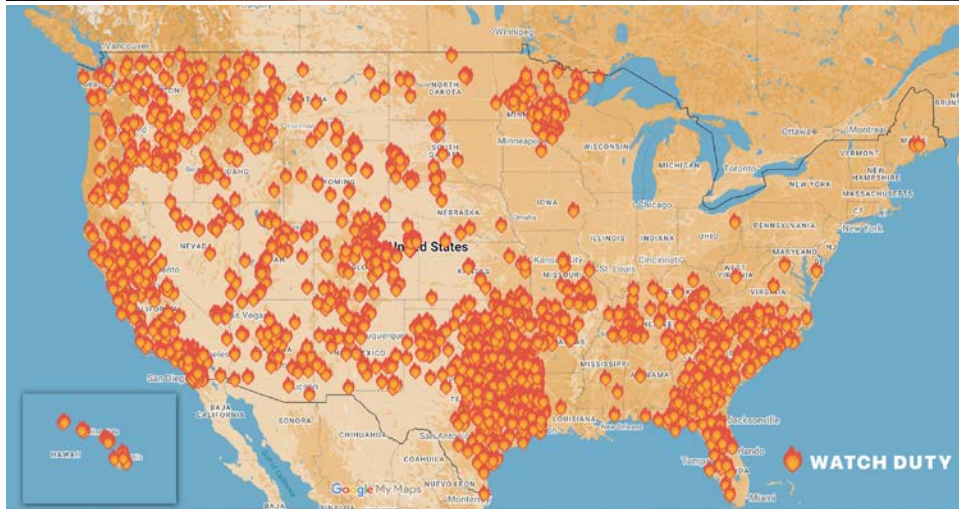
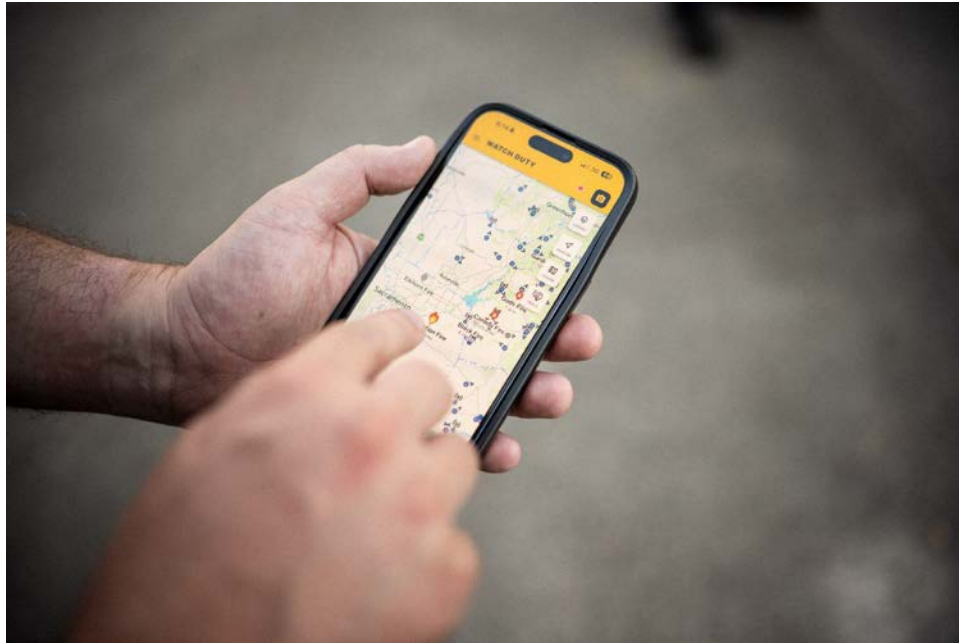
And finally, the delivery mechanisms are failing us. Increasingly, agencies post updates on social media, where misinformation and distortion immediately drown out life-saving instructions.

---

<sup>5</sup><https://abc7news.com/videoClip/4853500/>

# **WATCH DUTY**

Emergency alerts do not belong in comment sections. They belong in trusted, closed systems like Wireless Emergency Alerts, supported by clear, visual information. But even those alerts do not have a high delivery rate and as we saw in the LA fires, 3 false alerts were sent at ungodly hours. The entire system needs an overhaul.



Wildfire safety incidents reported on by Watch Duty in 2025 Credit: Watch Duty

## **V. Why This Matters**

Some agencies warn the public not to rely on Watch Duty and similar platforms. They'd prefer people visit their websites. Well guess what, so would we! But websites don't wake you up at night, alerts do.



We want public agencies to modernize alerting, trust Americans with more information, and communicate early and often. This is another reason why the Fix Our Forests Act is urgent. I want to express my appreciation for the speed with which the House passed this bill, and I encourage the Senate to do the same. I would also like to add my own perspective on what can make the Wildfire Intelligence Center successful.

Watch Duty believes that reducing bureaucratic delays and easing coordination among all partners is key to getting people the information they need when they need it. That's why Watch Duty supports the Fix Our Forests Act. Right now inadequate data integration and decision support for fire and land management agencies is wasting precious resources. Funds are being spent on scattered, uncoordinated, and inefficient efforts which I like to call "random acts of restoration." The Wildfire Intelligence Center contained in FOFA would improve coordination in wildfire mitigation by centralizing data collection and broadening access, providing advanced wildfire risk assessments, and supporting decision-making across multiple agencies and jurisdictions, as well. Watch Duty would be proud to partner with the Wildfire Intelligence Center to Act as a force multiplier for mitigation efforts. Improving the ability of our first responders to engage in an initial attack faster and with more precision than before.

Wildfires burn across jurisdictional lines and everything from preparation to response and recovery requires cooperation between local, state, Tribal, and federal agencies, including partners in the private sector and nonprofits like Watch Duty. Wildfires are a complex management challenge across natural landscapes through the built environment and everything in-between. This complexity demands a coordinated approach that ensures resources, expertise, and decision-making processes are efficiently aligned to mitigate risk and improve response efforts.

Whether it's a local fire station, community-led prescribed burn association, the National Park Service, Forest Service Hotshots, Tribes, or public health departments, every organization and every American should have real-time access to the best weather, fire-spread and smoke modeling, fire and fuel treatment history data, and common operating pictures available so they can plan effectively, operate safely, and collaborate across jurisdictions. Watch Duty supports the Fix Our Forests Act and creating the Wildfire Intelligence Center would centralize an agency responsible for doing this coordination.

## **VI. How to Get It Right**

When crafting policy and passing legislation such as the Fix Our Forests Act, I implore you to recognize the work that Watch Duty has already accomplished, without the financial support of tax-payers, and to integrate our work into the Intelligence Center. I fear that if the government stands this up on its own, or with the help of contractors, it will yield the same results: siloed intelligence that only helps the few, not the many.



We've seen this play out before with single source providers who prioritize profit, not people like me who live in underserved communities deep in the wildlands under the constant threat of wildfire.

Rather than trying to duplicate, replace, or smother solutions like ours, embrace a multi-source approach that gives Americans what they need by addressing the root causes that make evacuations chaotic and warnings ineffective. The Fix Our Forests Act would ensure that small companies and organizations pushing innovative solutions—both nonprofit and for profit—have a trusted partner in the federal government to engage with. Notably this legislation creates a multi-agency public-private wildfire technology testbed program otherwise called the Fire Innovation Unit in legislation introduced by Rep. Young Kim, Sen. Ben Ray Lujan, Sen. John Curtis, and Rep. Jason Crow. The Fire Innovation Unit would identify and advance key emerging technologies in a competitive pilot program. This provision is a substantial step forward in getting critical new technologies in the hands of those who desperately need them, when they need them.

No one should have needed Watch Duty. But we're here, we've proven essential for fire-impacted communities, and we're not going anywhere. Join with us in bringing Watch Duty's service to every first responder and every family.

Sincerely,

John Mills  
Co-founder & CEO, Watch Duty