



ORANGE COUNTY PROFESSIONAL FIREFIGHTERS ASSOCIATION IAFF LOCAL 3631



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Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Chris Hamm. I am a Fire Captain, and I serve as President of the Orange County Professional Firefighters, representing 1,200 firefighters who protect 23 cities, unincorporated Orange County, State and federal lands, including areas that border the Cleveland National Forest.

In Southern California, the line between wildland and built space is no longer a line — it is a blur. Our homes, schools, hospitals, and critical infrastructure sit directly against shrublands, canyons, and federal forest, so what starts as a brush fire on a slope becomes an urban fire problem in minutes. The Coastal Fire in Laguna Niguel in May of 2022 is a clear example: a rapidly moving brush fire outside our "fire season" and without significant winds ignited in dry coastal vegetation, burned roughly 200 acres, and destroyed 20 homes valued at nearly \$200 million, while damaging at least a dozen more, all in a community in South Orange County that the lay person would characterize as a suburban community. To make matters worse, this community had defensible space and was built with strict wild fire construction codes.

Those homes were not remote cabins; they were multi-million-dollar residences in a dense coastal community with steep slopes and limited ways out. High localized winds, drought-stressed brush, and invasive grasses allowed that fire to run quickly up canyon walls and into backyards, overwhelming well-prepared defensible space and pre-positioned hose lines. Subsequent investigations have tied the ignition to electrical equipment, showing how quickly a spark in the wildland–urban interface can translate into a mass-evacuation event with families fleeing. Thanks to the rapid response and hard work of our firefighters no deaths were attributed to this incident.

We saw the other side of this problem with the Airport Fire that adjacent to the Cleveland national forest on September 2024 and ultimately burned more than 23,000 acres across Orange and Riverside Counties, primarily under the jurisdiction of the Cleveland National Forest. That fire threatened and destroyed homes in communities like El Cariso Village and Deckert Canyon, burned through recreational cabins on federal land, and forced long-term closures in the Trabuco Ranger District to protect public safety because of hazards like unstable slopes, damaged roads, and tree-fall risk. A Forest Order now keeps much of that burn scar closed into 2026.

From a firefighter's perspective, there is a fundamental operational difference between fast-moving fires in light, flashy fuels and fires burning in heavy timber and large, 10,000-hour fuels. In light fuels that dominate our coastal slopes and much of the wildland–urban interface—annual grasses, invasive weeds, and shrubland—fires ignite easily, respond almost instantly to wind, and erase any meaningful separation between "the wildland" and structures. In heavy timber and large downed material, fire behavior can be intense and

Representing Professional Firefighters protecting the cities of:

Aliso Viejo • Buena Park • Cypress • Dana Point • Garden Grove • Irvine • Laguna Hills • Laguna Niguel • Laguna Woods • Lake Forest • La Palma • Los Alamitos
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long-duration, but the boundary between the forest and the developed area is often more defined, which allows for clearer planning, constructed fuel breaks, and defensive tactics around structures.

The challenge in Southern California is that we have both conditions layered together. A fire may start in flashy fuels below a neighborhood, quickly transition into structure fires as embers land on roofs and in backyards, and then run into the forest, heavier brush and timber on federal lands, becoming a large, long-duration incident like the Airport Fire. That means when we respond, we are simultaneously managing a wildland fire, a structure fire, and a federal land incident, often being managed by the initial responding units.

Fire is and always has been part of our natural landscape, but what we are seeing now is not the historic fire regime for these ecosystems. Year-after-year fires, prolonged drought, and the spread of invasive grasses and weeds have fundamentally altered shrubland ecosystems like chaparral and coastal sage scrub. These invasive's create continuous carpets of fine fuels that dry early, carry fire farther and faster, and then re-establish quickly after a burn, along with more developments encroaching into the wildland, we are locked into a cycle of shorter fire-return intervals, higher intensity, and more frequent structure loss at the edge of communities. That is exactly the pattern we see along our coastal slopes and in the canyons draining into the Cleveland National Forest.

The financial and life-safety stakes in our region are unmatched. In a place like coastal Orange County, a 200-acre fire can destroy tens or hundreds of millions of dollars in property in a matter of hours, as the Coastal Fire did in Laguna Niguel. The Airport Fire's 23,000-plus acres included not only federal lands and recreation cabins, but also homes and infrastructure in small communities that do not have the tax base to absorb repeated disasters, prompting ongoing recovery costs. Layer that on top of the sheer population density of Southern California, and every new shrubland ignition in the wildland-urban interface is a life-safety emergency for thousands of residents and for the firefighters who respond.

That is why I am here in strong support of Congressman Dave Min's BRUSH Fires Act, H.R. 3553. The Act directs the Secretary of Agriculture, through the U.S. Forest Service, to complete a shrubland-specific wildfire mitigation study within one year, focused on communities within or adjacent to chaparral, coastal sage scrub, and other dry shrub ecosystems. It requires the Forest Service to evaluate how effective existing wildfire-mitigation methods actually are in shrublands and in high-risk communities, including hazardous-fuels treatments, land-use and defensible-space practices, and how invasive species and infrastructure contribute to shrubland fire behavior.

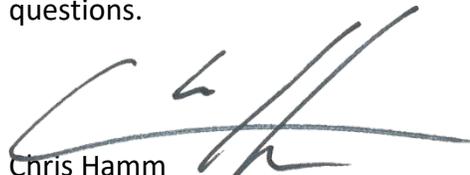
For front-line firefighters and the communities we protect, this bill matters because it acknowledges that shrubland fire is its own problem—not just a smaller version of a forest fire. It will force a hard look at which strategies work under Southern California's wind, slope, and fuel conditions; where we should prioritize treatments in the wildland-urban interface; and what policy and budget barriers keep us from doing the right work in the right places. The Act specifically calls out invasive grasses and weeds, pushing for science-based

approaches that break the invasive-fire cycle and restore more resilient native vegetation where people and shrublands meet.

In my view, the BRUSH Fires Act is not an academic exercise; it is a necessary step toward a realistic, shrubland-specific playbook for places exactly like the communities my members serve. We need detailed mapping of our highest-risk interface corridors, better understanding of how fires like the Coastal Fire and the Airport Fire actually behaved across fuels and jurisdictions, and clear recommendations for where federal, state, and local agencies should focus limited dollars to meaningfully reduce risk. That kind of targeted, science-driven understanding will help us design fuel treatments, land-use decisions, and infrastructure standards that reflect the blurred reality on the ground.

I urge the Subcommittee to advance the BRUSH Fires Act and to pair it with sustained support for implementing its findings in shrubland-dominated, high-value, high-population regions like Southern California. Our firefighters are ready to do the work; we need the federal government to give us specific science, policies, and tools to match the threats we face.

Thank you for your time and for your leadership on this issue. I look forward to your questions.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Chris Hamm', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Chris Hamm
President
Orange County Firefighters
IAFF Local 3631