

STATEMENT
OF
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COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND
INVESTIGATIONS

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This nation does not have a wildland fire problem. It has a wildland management leadership problem.

My name is Dan Munsey. I am the Fire Chief and Fire Warden for the San Bernardino County Fire Protection District. This written testimony is submitted in response to the invitation to testify before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, regarding the hearing titled, “Fix Our Forests: How Improved Land Management Can Protect Communities in the Wildland Urban Interface.”

I have over 29 years of experience in the fire service. For the past five years, I have served as the Fire Chief of the largest fire district in the United States. I am a director on FIREScope, a board that provides recommendations and technical assistance to the fire service, including oversight of the FIREScope Incident Command System (ICS) and the Multi-Agency Coordination System. I currently serve as President of the California Metro Chiefs Association, which includes some of the largest fire agencies in the nation. For the past five years, I also served as Chairperson of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) Technology Council. The IAFC represents the leadership of 1.1 million firefighters across the country.

San Bernardino is the largest county in the continental United States, covering more than 20,000 square miles—larger than New Jersey, Connecticut, Delaware, and Rhode Island combined. The county encompasses diverse geography, including coastal valleys, mountainous terrain, and vast desert regions. San Bernardino County is home to two of the most visited and populated national forests: the San Bernardino National Forest and a portion of the Angeles National Forest. Nearly 80% of the county’s landmass is public land, with federal land accounting for the vast majority. We serve 2.2 million residents across 66 communities, many of which are isolated and surrounded by federal land in both mountain and desert regions. This means that San Bernardino County Fire frequently responds to all-hazard emergencies originating on federal lands—and likewise, federal lands are often impacted by emergencies that originate in our local jurisdiction.

I want to thank Chairman Gosar and the members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to share my testimony on what I believe is the root cause of today’s uncontrollable wildfires. Despite what some recent headlines may suggest, the primary issue is not a lack of water supply, hot and dry weather, climate change, steep terrain, negligent utilities, or even arson. These are contributing factors—but the root problem is land management. Simply put, this nation does not have a wildland fire problem; it has a land management problem. If we fail to manage our public and private lands proactively, wildfires will continue to be the inevitable and devastating result.

Last year, San Bernardino County experienced two major wildfires burning simultaneously and threatening our communities: the Line Fire (43,978 acres) and the Bridge Fire (56,030 acres). Both fires provide compelling case studies on how communities in the wildland urban interface can either be protected—or left vulnerable—depending on how the surrounding land is managed

Land Ownership/Fuel Treatment Responsibility

Understanding land “ownership” is critical to the discussion of land management. Ownership can be divided into four primary categories: federal, state, tribal, and local jurisdictions. Each of these jurisdictions operates under different laws, ordinances, and policies. Often, the boundaries of these ownership areas are intermixed in a checkerboard-like pattern across the landscape, further complicating land management.

Adding to this complexity, multiple federal agencies may have authority over different sections of land. These may include the United States Forest Service (USFS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), National Park Service (NPS), and Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), among others. Even within federal land management, inconsistency arises—one forest supervisor may interpret environmental policies more strictly than another, and these individuals often have broad discretion in decision-making.

Additionally, overlapping regulatory agencies such as the Air Quality Management Districts (AQMD), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) may also influence land management decisions. Federal protections for endangered species or habitats can overlay federal, state, and even private lands, adding another layer of regulatory complexity.

At a macro level, the theory behind land management is not difficult. It requires a coordinated application of six key elements:

1. Vegetation management and fuel reduction
2. Land use planning
3. Fire-resistant building practices
4. Management of forest and ecosystem health (as healthier forests tend to be more fire-resistant)
5. Ensuring access
6. Emergency planning and community education

If any one of these six components is weak or missing, the likelihood of large, uncontrollable wildfires increases significantly.

Effective land management must be approached holistically, transcending jurisdictional boundaries. Threats and hazards must be assessed without regard to political lines in order to determine true risk. If any government entity fails to uphold its land management responsibilities, it becomes nearly impossible to adequately protect communities in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

One of the most significant challenges we face is that no single agency holds authority over all land management efforts. Each entity often operates independently, and there is no clear lead agency responsible for aligning cohesive land management strategies. In practice, this responsibility frequently falls to local governments—who typically own the least amount of

wildland—to coordinate disparate agencies, reconcile conflicting policies, and drive unified action toward shared land management goals

Ensuring Access and Fuel Breaks

In the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) created fire breaks and roads throughout the San Bernardino National Forest (SBNF) using bulldozers, other types of heavy equipment, and hand tools. The CCC’s efforts in the SBNF were based on the understanding that fire breaks and rapid access to wildfires would help limit fire spread.

The photograph on the next page (Figure 1) provides an example of the scope of this work during the 1930s. It was taken from Highway 18 at what is now called the “Donald S. Wieman Vista Point,” sometime in the late 1930s. Notably, it shows a wide network of access roads and fire breaks that were constructed to help contain wildfires and allow firefighters quick access to fire areas.

Figure 1. A view of the San Bernardino National Forest from the 1930’s showing robust fuel breaks and access roads.



The next picture (Figure 2) was taken on May 9, 2025, from Donald S. Wieman Vista Point, showing the same geographical area.

Note the absence of fire breaks and access roads. This reflects a broader issue seen throughout much of the San Bernardino National Forest and many other forests across the nation. The lack

of road maintenance hampers firefighter access, and the absence of fuel breaks allows fires to spread more rapidly and extensively.

When faced with access challenges, firefighters may be forced to use helicopters (if available), hike into fire zones, rely on mule or horse trains, or wait for heavy equipment to improve or construct fire access roads.

Rather than using pre-existing control lines—like those visible in the 1930s image above—firefighters today often must rely on natural barriers such as rock outcroppings, lakes, rivers, or barren terrain. Alternatively, they must create new control lines using heavy machinery or hand tools to contain and control the fire.

It is important to understand that fires occurring in federal lands can grow significantly before any fire suppression action is taken. A local government fire agency has a legal duty to respond immediately to fire calls for service within its jurisdiction. The federal government, on the other hand, is not always required to immediately respond to a wildfire on its land.

This delay is often due to environmental or policy considerations that require a fire management team to conduct an environmental analysis, consider endangered species protections, or wait for specialized resources. During this time, a fire may grow significantly, especially in remote or rugged terrain. In contrast, local agencies are often restricted from entering federal lands for fire suppression unless a delegation of authority is issued, or unless specific agreements are in place.

This difference in response times, authorities, and policies between local and federal agencies contributes to the challenge of effectively managing wildfires—particularly when those fires cross jurisdictional boundaries.

Figure 2. The same view as the picture above today showing a lack of fire access roads and fuel breaks.



The next picture (Figure 3) was taken from the same location as the previous two photos, with the view shifted slightly to the northeast. The prominent hillside visible in the earlier images now appears near the center-right of the frame. The Line Fire, which occurred in September 2024, burned 43,978 acres before it was contained using natural rock drainages, Highway 330, constructed control lines, and a shaded fuel break south of Big Bear Lake, California.

From the peak of the hillside extending toward the left side of the image, the entire area has been completely burned. Clearly visible in the photograph is a network of bulldozer-constructed control lines that were built as the fire advanced

Figure 3. The Line Fire burn scar showing newly constructed bulldozer control lines.



In 2018, President Donald Trump issued Executive Order 13855, which promoted the active management of forests to reduce wildfire risks. The executive order stated: “Active management of vegetation is needed to treat these dangerous conditions on Federal lands but is often delayed due to challenges associated with regulatory analysis and current consultation requirements.” It further emphasized the need to reduce regulatory obstacles to fuel reduction in forests, particularly those created by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The concept of actively managing forests to mitigate wildfire risk is not new—it was a widespread practice throughout much of the previous century.

As a firefighter, I often question why we wait for wildfire destruction before taking action. It's difficult not to ask why roads and fuel breaks that were created a century ago can no longer be maintained due to environmental concerns. Instead, we wait for a fire to occur, watch it devastate the environment, and only then do we construct fire access roads and control lines.

Modern Fuel Treatment Methods

While clear-cut fuel breaks are effective in fire control, many other tools are available for fuel treatment. Numerous publications demonstrate the effectiveness of fuel treatment in reducing wildfire intensity after an active fire. Areas that have been treated with fuel management strategies generally aim to keep fires at a lower intensity and prevent them from reaching tree canopies, thus allowing firefighters to establish control lines and halt fire growth.

Mastication – Mastication is a mechanical fuel treatment that alters the structure and size of fuels. Brush and understory vegetation are ground up or chipped, and the resulting byproduct is left on the ground.

Cut and Lay / Cut and Chip – Small trees and brush are cut and either laid on the ground (for later prescribed burns) or cut and chipped, with the material spread back onto the landscape.

Cut, Pile, and Burn – Small trees and brush are cut, then piled for later burning.

Prescribed Fire / Controlled Burns – This involves carefully preparing and planning an area for a low-intensity ground fire.

The Bridge Fire, which occurred in August 2025, burned over 34,000 acres in a single day. However, when the explosive fire reached fuel treatment areas, it quickly transitioned to a lower intensity, allowing firefighters to gain control of the fire front.

Figure 4. After hand thinning and chipping. Looking downhill from Table Mountain Turnout 5/3/2023



Figure 5. The Bridge Fire burns through the treatment with low intensity. Looking downhill from Table Mountain Turnout 9/11/2024.



The Bridge Fire burns through the treatment with low intensity. Looking downhill from Table Mountain Turnout 9/11/2024.

Maintenance of Existing Fuel Treatment and Fire Breaks

It is common for fuel treatment projects and fire breaks to be constructed without a plan for ongoing maintenance. As vegetation regrows, the effectiveness of these treatments diminishes over time. The reasons for this lack of maintenance are often related to ongoing funding issues or changing environmental regulations. Each project should identify future sources of funding to ensure continued maintenance and effectiveness.

Timber Removal

Local government fire services have the most at stake when it comes to wildland fires destroying homes and businesses. While environmental protections must not be ignored, we must also prioritize the protection of the “human habitat.” Most homes at risk are not located on U.S. Forest Service (USFS) property; they are on private property within the boundaries of the first-in response jurisdiction of local governments.

Over the years, the San Bernardino County Fire Protection District (Fire District) has taken a unique approach to mitigating fire danger on private property to protect both public lands and vice versa. In 2003, during a severe bark beetle tree mortality crisis (Figure 5), the Fire District collaborated with the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) on private property projects. This collaboration helped streamline environmental review and ensure compliance with both federal and state environmental protection agencies. By cutting through red tape and accelerating project start dates, the effort resulted in the removal of over 1.1 million dead trees through more than 1,000 forestry projects.

Figure 5. Bark Beetle Infestation in San Bernardino National Forest (Circa 2003)



This was accomplished by the Fire District leading an interagency, multi-level cooperative task force—including CalTrans, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), CAL FIRE, Southern California Edison, the County of San Bernardino, environmental groups, and Fire Safe Councils—to reduce hazardous timber and unmanaged fuels within forested areas, regardless of jurisdiction. This leadership and collaboration significantly improved the efficiency and effectiveness of multiple government agencies.

Our Fire District partnered with the San Bernardino County Public Works Department to develop and manage agreements and contracts with private logging companies. These efforts led to substantial improvements in forest conditions by removing unmanaged vegetation that increased wildfire risk. From 2003 to 2010, the Fire District oversaw more than 1,000 forestry projects, resulting in the removal of over 1 million dead trees and millions of tons of biomass.

Lack of Technology Implementation into Processes

Permitting processes are complex. Even relatively simple land management projects often require 4 to 6 weeks to move through various agency approvals.

Given modern geographic information systems (GIS), published rules and guidelines, and advancements in automated workflow management, why can't permitting processes be automated?

In local government, “one-stop shops” exist to streamline permitting and approvals. In the field of wildland management, however, no such centralized system exists. Each agency operates independently and follows lengthy, siloed approval processes.

Technology—especially GIS—has the capability to identify land ownership, zoning, air quality standards, water impact considerations, and protected species concerns. Algorithms can be used to review submissions for completeness and flag potential hazards and risks. Dashboards can display project proposals, enhance public communication, provide real-time updates, and track permit progress. Field inspections can be conducted virtually or used to augment inspectors’ documentation and verification efforts.

Closing

In closing, we must stop waiting for wildfire to destroy our communities before taking action. There are three critical improvements needed—central to the goal of improving land management to protect communities in the Wildland Urban Interface—that require congressional attention:

1. **Clear Leadership:** Establish a single entity or individual with the authority to oversee and coordinate all federal land management and agency efforts.
2. **Consistency in Decision-Making:** Land management decisions must be centralized. Allowing individuals to apply their own interpretations of policy introduces inconsistency and bias.
3. **Leverage Technology:** Use technology to minimize human bias, increase efficiency, enhance agility, and enable effective, data-driven land management.

Roads and fuel breaks that were effective a century ago can be effective again—if we commit to proactive land management. The solution to our wildfire crisis is not new. It lies in restoring and modernizing proven practices, embracing technology to streamline processes, and ensuring collaboration among federal, state, and local leaders. Through unified leadership and simplified, smart systems, we can reduce the threat of wildfire and better protect our communities.