**To**: U.S. House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
**From:** Matt Weiner, CEO, Megafire Action
**Subject:** Fix Our Forests: How Improved Land Management Can Protect Communities in the Wildland-Urban Interface
**Date:** May 15th, 2025

## Introduction

Chairman Gosar, Vice Chair Boebert, Ranking Member Dexter, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on legislative options to reduce catastrophic wildfire. My name is Matt Weiner, and I'm the founder and CEO of Megafire Action, a non-profit organization committed to ending the megafire crisis through a holistic approach to land management, wildfire response, and community resilience.

January's devastating fires in Los Angeles were just the latest, tragic demonstration of the need for bipartisan legislative action to address the escalating wildfire crisis across the United States. I am honored to testify in support of the Fix Our Forests Act, which passed the House of Representatives on a wide bipartisan basis and has now been introduced in the Senate by a bipartisan group of senators. This legislation represents an essential step toward reversing decades of mismanagement and reducing the scale and intensity of catastrophic wildfire.

Decades of fire exclusion combined with ineffective land management, expansion of poorly planned development in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), and extremely hot and dry conditions have created a megafire crisis across the United States. Catastrophic megafires—distinguished by their extreme intensity, rapid spread, and large-scale destruction—are no longer anomalies but a persistent national emergency. These fires threaten human lives, destroy homes and critical infrastructure, and reshape ecosystems in ways that may be irreversible. Their impact extends beyond burned landscapes and communities; wildfires release massive amounts of carbon into the atmosphere, exacerbating climate change and contributing to long-term environmental degradation that fuels ever greater wildfires in a viscous feedback loop. We are running out of time to prevent widespread devastation to communities, ecosystems, and the environment and legislative action is needed now more than ever.

At its core, the Fix Our Forests Act tackles three key challenges: community wildfire resilience, permitting reform, and technology adoption for improved decision making—all essential to scaling up effective wildfire mitigation work in the Wildland Urban Interface and beyond.

While this legislation will not resolve the long-standing workforce and budget constraints that have plagued wildfire mitigation and response for decades, it represents a critical and necessary step toward a more proactive and science-driven approach to wildfire management. We cannot ignore the fact that firefighters continue to be put in impossible positions - and our federal fighters in particular have been asked to do too much, with too little, for too long. A permanent, well-resourced federal wildfire workforce remains an urgent need.

The Fix Our Forests Act directly addresses key hurdles that are worth solving on their own, removing bureaucratic roadblocks that slow down essential forest restoration projects, expanding wildfire resilience work in communities, and integrating cutting-edge technology to modernize wildfire decision-making. In short, this legislation will make it easier for the federal wildfire workforce and communities to do the critical work that keeps us safe.

The bipartisan, good faith negotiating process in the House led by Chairman Westerman and Representative Peters along with parallel efforts in the Senate have resulted in legislation that has the potential to significantly enhance landscape and community resilience and wildfire mitigation efforts. I look forward to working with the Committee to continue building on that progress and further refine and strengthen the bill to maximize its impact.

## The Increasing Frequency and Severity of Catastrophic Wildfire

The growing scale and intensity of wildfires across the country present an alarming trend. While the majority of wildfires burn with relatively few adverse impacts, a small subset of fires—less than 3 percent—are responsible for nearly 90 percent of home losses[1]. From 2005 to 2023, over 103,980 structures were destroyed by wildfire.[2] Looking beyond communities, a spate of wildfires tore through forests in California and killed nearly 20% of all the giant sequoias in the world between 2015 and 2021.[3] Trees that had thrived with the regular occurrence of moderate- to low-severity fire for the first several thousand years of their life were killed by the uncharacteristic, extreme wildfires fueled by our relatively recent past century of fire suppression and land management policies.

Recent fires in California provide a sobering case study. The 2025 Fires in Los Angeles County destroyed over 56 percent of all properties in Pacific Palisades and nearly half of the properties in Altadena.[4] According to UCLA Anderson School of Management, total property and capital losses from these fires range between $95 billion and $164 billion, with insured losses estimated at $75 billion. These are levels of damage comparable to major natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina.[5] These fires claimed 29 lives, underscoring the deadly consequences of inadequate wildfire mitigation in the WUI.

Despite the severity of these fires, they are not unique. Wildfire seasons are growing longer, fueled by drought, extreme heat, and excessive vegetation buildup. When paired with extreme winds like the Santa Anas of Southern California, these fast-moving fires exceed the suppression capacity of federal, state, and local agencies, overwhelming firefighting resources and leaving communities with few options for protection and recovery. It is noteworthy that the recent destruction in Los Angeles occurred despite the deployment of 4,700+ firefighting personnel, 6 air tankers, 31 helicopters, and 1,002 engines—a testament to the heroic efforts of CAL FIRE and the Los Angeles Fire Department.[6]

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[1] Jennifer K. Balch et al.,The fastest-growing and most destructive fires in the US (2001 to 2020). Science 386, 425-431 (2024). DOI:10.1126/science.adk5737

[2] Kimiko Barrett, (2024), Wildfires destroy thousands of structures each year. Headwaters Economics. https://headwaterseconomics.org/natural-hazards/structures-destroyed-by-wildfire/

[3] U.S. National Park Service, July 18, 2023, "Wildfires Kill Unprecedented Numbers of Large Sequoia Trees". https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/wildfires-kill-unprecedented-numbers-of-large-sequoia-trees.htm

[4]https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-02-21/real-estate-losses-from-palisades-and-eaton-fires-top-30-billion

[5] Ibid.

[6]https://news.caloes.ca.gov/more-than-7500-firefighting-emergency-personnel-deployed-to-fight-unprecedented-los-angeles-

If some of the best suppression-equipped and trained agencies in the world cannot stop fires of a certain magnitude, less equipped regions throughout the country don't stand a chance.

## Promoting Community Resilience and Addressing the Insurance Crisis

The Los Angeles fires demonstrate how wildfires can rapidly transition into urban conflagrations, destroying entire city blocks. Once a fire breaches the wildland-urban interface, it can spread from structure to structure, fueled by embers, radiant heat, and direct flame contact. This reality underscores the urgent need for comprehensive community hardening and resilience efforts, which can also alleviate the growing crisis in the affordability and availability of insurance in fire-prone regions.

Home hardening and defensible space are crucial yet underutilized components of wildfire risk reduction. Many homes destroyed by wildfire ignite due to embers landing on vulnerable structures—not direct flame contact. This means that the design and materials used in constructing a house—known as home hardening—and the landscaping immediately around a house—known as Zone 0 defensible space—are critical factors contributing to the risk that a home will ignite when wildfires occur. Research shows that home hardening and defensible space can increase the likelihood that a home survives a fire by 40%.[7] Yet, creating and maintaining ember-resistant homes and landscaping in high risk areas remains underemphasized in federal wildfire policy. It is crucial for the federal government to take further action to promote home hardening activities in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI), as the return on investment for mitigation is substantive. According to recent analysis, the benefit-cost ratio of constructing new buildings to meet the International Wildland-Urban Interface Code (IWUIC) standards is 4:1, while the benefit-cost ratio of federal funding to mitigate wildfire risk in the WUI is 3:1, meaning that $1 of investment in home hardening results in an estimated $3 in avoided loss to future fire.[8]

Despite these clear benefits, current federal grant programs like the Community Wildfire Defense Grant (CWDG) Program, funded by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), cannot currently support home hardening projects. The Senate version of the Fix Our Forests Act directly addresses this gap by expanding Community Wildfire Defense Grant (CWDG) eligibility to include funding specifically for home hardening and zone 0 defensible space actions. This strategic addition would enable communities to access financial support for ember-resistant building materials, improved venting, and non-combustible landscaping. Additionally, CWDG eligibility would no longer be restricted to the continental United States, and project implementation grants would no longer be contingent on the existence of a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP)—a barrier that has prevented communities like Los Angeles from accessing critical funding. These enhancements will allow more communities to access essential funds for fire-resistant construction and wildfire prevention technologies. If paired with effective funding these changes could be transformative.

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fires/#:~:text=More%20than%207%2C500%20firefighting%2C%20emergency,Angeles%20fires%20%7C%20Cal%20OES%20News

[7] 2024 Headwaters Economics "Missing the Mark: Effectiveness and Funding in Community Wildfire Risk Reduction"; https://headwaterseconomics.org/natural-hazards/missing-the-mark-wildfire/

[8] 2019 NIBS Mitigation Saves report https://www.nibs.org/projects/natural-hazard-mitigation-saves-2019-report

The Fix Our Forests Act establishes the Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program under Title II. Inspired by Recommendation 1 from the Wildfire Mitigation and Management Commission, this program is designed to improve interagency coordination and provide communities with the resources needed to reduce wildfire risk.[9] The program has five core objectives: advancing wildfire research and science, supporting local adoption of wildfire-resistant codes and standards, assisting communities in addressing wildfire impacts on property and air and water quality, encouraging public-private partnerships for fuel reduction, and expanding technical and financial assistance to at-risk communities. To streamline access to these resources, the bill requires USDA, DOI, and FEMA to create a unified and simplified application process for communities seeking financial or technical assistance. Additionally, the Fix Our Forests Act strengthens the Joint Fire Science Program by incorporating a new research initiative focused on innovative designs for wildfire-resistant structures and communities. It also establishes a competition to drive innovation in resilient building practices, ensuring that emerging technologies and best practices are rapidly integrated into community planning efforts.

An alarming side effect of worsening wildfires is a growing crisis in homeowners' insurance and home and parcel risk across the West. In California—which has seen record wildfire losses—major insurers have either raised premiums substantially or pulled back from high-risk areas altogether, refusing to issue new policies and even dropping existing customers by the tens of thousands. While states must look at new regulatory frameworks to address this crisis, the federal government can alleviate pressure by promoting holistic risk reduction at the community and parcel level. At the parcel level, analyses show that comprehensive home hardening measures can decrease risk by up to 74%.[10] At the community level, a study by the Nature Conservancy (TNC) demonstrated that ecological forestry (including fuels reduction) can lead to savings in aggregate annual home insurance premiums of 41%.[11] Fix Our Forests Act provisions that address the risk in the built environment and WUI would go a long way toward alleviating the insurance crisis in the western United States.

As wildfires increasingly threaten densely populated areas, it is imperative that the federal government support efforts to improve home hardening, urban planning, and fire-resistant construction and landscaping. The Fix Our Forests Act acknowledges this reality and provides critical tools to help communities prepare for and withstand the growing threat of wildfire-driven urban disasters.

## Addressing the Unprecedented Hazardous Fuels Crisis with Permitting Reform

The United States' historical approach to fire management has significantly worsened wildfire risk to landscapes and communities in the Wildland Urban Interface. For over a century, federal and state agencies prioritized fire suppression, aggressively prohibiting and extinguishing all wildland fires. Although intended to protect communities and natural resources such as timber, this strategy has resulted in dangerously high fuel loads in many fire-adapted landscapes that had previously burned at regular intervals due to nature and widespread Indigenous stewardship practices. Now, when

[9] https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/wfmmc-final-report-09-2023.pdf
[10] https://www.guidewire.com/resources/blog/technology/analyzing-the-effectiveness-of-wildfire-mitigation-measures
[11] https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/FINALwildfireresilienceinsurance6.27.21.pdf

unintended fires spark in these fire-deficient landscapes, the fires burn hotter, faster, and more out of control, resulting in ever more destructive outcomes.

However, since this is a crisis we created, it should also be recognized as a crisis we can solve. The expanded use of selective thinning and the intentional reintroduction of prescribed fire and Indigenous cultural burning in fire-deficit forests can help reduce hazardous fuel loads, restore ecosystem balance, and promote fire-adapted landscapes. A recent meta analysis of 40 studies looking at the effectiveness of past treatments found that when conducted in tandem, thinning + prescribed fire treatments can reduce the severity of subsequent wildfires by up to 70% in Western US conifer forests.[12]

As outlined in the Wildfire Crisis Strategy, the goal of federal policy is now to reintroduce "good fire"—low intensity wildfire that clears excess fuels—through vegetation treatments, which "typically involve thinning fuels and removing vegetation to reduce heavy fuel loads that can increase the risk of extreme wildfire events and using a risk-based approach to restore healthy fire to fire-adapted ecosystems."[13] Over a period of 10 years, the Wildfire Crisis Strategy calls for:

> *(1) Treating up to an additional 20 million acres in the National Forest System in the West, over and above current treatment levels;*
> *(2) Treating up to an additional 30 million acres on other Federal, State, Tribal, and private lands in the West; and*
> *(3) Developing a plan for long-term maintenance beyond the 10 years*

*We are nowhere close to meeting these goals.* In fiscal year 2024, the Forest Service treated 803,633 acres across the Wildfire Crisis Strategy landscapes—a record high for the agency—but still far short of what is needed. To truly get ahead of this crisis, we must go beyond the standard 2 to 3 million acres treated annually and scale up by millions more.[14]

There are several impediments to increasing the pace and scale of treatments: workforce shortages, a lack of markets and processing infrastructure for the excess biomass removed during fuel-reduction treatments, and lackluster deployment of innovative technologies. However, one of the most significant barriers is the cost and complexity of environmental permitting. The lengthy, expensive, and bureaucratic permitting process often results in years of delays, preventing critical treatment projects from moving through planning to implementation. In 2002, the Forest Service "estimated that planning and assessment consume 40 percent of total direct work at the national forest level…an expenditure of more than $250 million per year."[15] This expenditure has no doubt grown since 2002.

Compounding the problem, it takes an "average of 193 days to complete a categorical exclusion review, 519 days for an [Environmental Assessment], and 1082 days for an [Environmental Impact Statement]" meaning there are often years between a project being "shovel ready" and the work actually taking place.[16] When projects are delayed by years, conditions on the ground have often

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[12] Kimberly Davis et. al., 2024. "Tamm Review: A Meta-Analysis of Thinning, Prescribed Fire, and Wildfire Effects on Subsequent Wildfire Severity in Conifer Dominated Forests of the Western US." Forest Ecology and Management 561: 121885. doi:10.1016/j.foreco.2024.121885.

[13] https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Wildfire-Crisis-Implementation-Plan.pdf

[14] https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Wildfire-Crisis-Implementation-Plan.pdf

[15] https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects-policies/documents/Process-Predicament.pdf

[16] Clark, Sara A., et al. 2024, https://doi.org/10.1186/s42408-024-00301-ylark

significantly changed during that period and the location, feasibility, and prioritization of treatments often must be reassessed, necessitating even more planning. This is an unacceptable state of affairs given the emergency of catastrophic fire, and it's important to realize that this is not just an issue for protecting remote landscapes; it affects vulnerable communities in the Wildland Urban Interface as well.

In response to this issue, policymakers have taken action to remove hurdles in select regions. The 2016 Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act created a 10,000 acre CE for fuels reduction projects in the Lake Tahoe Basin, which enabled more land to be treated faster, helping to maintain forest health, create defensible space, and protect communities. In a FY25 budget hearing, Chief of the Forest Service, Randy Moore, stated that Lake Tahoe's congressionally designated 10,000 acre CE was "very beneficial" to halting the Caldor Fire in South Lake Tahoe, potentially preventing the significant loss of property and lives.[17] The State of California has requested that Congress "Expand US Forest Service Categorical Exclusion authority from 3,000 to 10,000 acres for fire-prone areas in the western US."[18]

After losing 20% of the world's sequoias to extreme wildfires, the USFS in 2022 initiated an emergency action to expedite NEPA review to respond to the imminent threat of wildfires.[19] The result was an immediate change in progress, the Giant Sequoias Land Coalition was able to significantly ramp up the pace and scale of work in sequoia groves within the first year of the emergency declaration.[20] Since then, the Coalition has successfully treated 54% of giant sequoia forests for improved wildfire resilience.[21]

These examples from California demonstrate that we can rise to the occasion and solve the megafire crisis. What's needed now is to expand efforts nationwide, and once again policymakers are taking action. *Just a few months ago in March,* President Trump and California Governor Newsom issued similar orders to remove regulatory hurdles and expedite wildfire mitigation projects for federal and state responsibility lands respectively.[22] The Fix Our Forests Act compliments these emergency declarations by codifying in statute much needed process to ensure success.

Categorical exclusions (CE) are one tool that have been used by land managers to get urgently needed projects to the ground more quickly and cheaply. CEs are a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) determination that certain proposed actions (such as a critical fuels reduction project) do not require lengthier Environmental Assessments (EA) or Environmental Impact Statements (EIS).

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[17] Response to Congressman McClintock, June 4, 2024, https://naturalresources.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=416081

[18] https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/Farm_Bill/pdfs/2023_Farm_Bill_Priorities_FINAL.pdf

[19] USFS, July 22, 2022, "Forest Service Taking Emergency Action to Protect Giant Sequoias" https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/news/press-releases/2022/07/22/forest-service-taking-emergency-action-protect-giant-sequoias

[20] California State Parks, Dec 14, 2022. "Giant Sequoia Lands Coalition Gains Momentum in Fight to Protect Giant Sequoias Threatened by Unprecedented Wildfire Risk" https://www.parks.ca.gov/NewsRelease/1133

[21] Save the Redwoods League Annual Report 2023-24. https://www.savetheredwoods.org/about-us/publications/2023-24-annual-report/

[22] President Trump Executive Order, March 1, 2025, "Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production",https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/immediate-expansion-of-american-timber-production/ CA Governor Newsom, March 1, 2025, State of Emergency Proclamation to fast-track critical wildfire prevention projects statewide. https://www.gov.ca.gov/2025/03/01/with-growing-fire-risk-governor-newsom-proclaims-state-of-emergency-to-fast-track-critical-wildfire-prevention-projects-statewide/

The Fix Our Forests Act (FOFA) expands limits on CEs under NEPA from 3,000 to 10,000 acres, providing flexibility to do critical work on the highest risk areas identified by the Wildfire Crisis Strategy *before* areas succumb to megafire. Projects receiving up to a 10,000 acre CE must be identified by a fireshed assessment that complies with applicable forest plans developed with community input, the best available science, Tribal knowledge, and local participation, reducing the risk that CEs will be used for projects harmful to forests.

In assessing the potential benefits of 10,000 acre CEs, we lean on practitioner perspectives. Our board member Kelly Martin—Retired Chief of Fire and Aviation at Yosemite National Park and Prescribed Fire Burn Boss—had the following to say about Categorical Exclusions:

> *"Categorical exclusions (CE) are a key tool for forest resilience and wildfire mitigation. Currently, there is an over-allocation of funding and human capital dedicated to planning and revising existing NEPA Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or Environmental Assessment (EA) documents sometimes 5 to 10 years in the making. This favors what seems like endless and duplicative planning efforts compared to implementing beneficial actions on the ground that we know are based on solid science and research. CEs help us streamline the public review process and start putting meaningful projects on the ground faster to meet existential wildfire threats.*
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> *Unfortunately, projects done under the current 3,000 acre CEs fall woefully short of what is needed to meet the ever-increasing size of contemporary wildfires. Smaller CEs often don't provide the buffer or resiliency needed to change conditions on the ground at a meaningful scale. In contrast, the value of a 10,000 acre CE is that you're not just looking at small sections, you're starting to look at the entire landscape and how it can withstand future challenges to watersheds, biodiversity, and key ecosystem services we deeply care about.*
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> *A common mindset around CEs is that they represent a rollback of environmental protections, but CEs are really about accelerating the implementation process for projects that have already been vetted and approved in existing land management plans backed by an EIS or EA. CEs are nothing new, they've been an important part of public engagement and meaningful land management actions for years. The CE reduces planning and analysis tiered to existing EISs and EAs and reduces the need for a redundant round of review for each specific project. This is not about returning to clear cut logging, going into sensitive areas, or removing mature growth old timber. We're talking about targeting areas that are accessible, where intervention can make a meaningful difference to landscape resilience. While forestry in the past, particularly in the early 1900s, often led to negative outcomes, those earlier mistakes should not cloud the judgment of today's forest management strategies, which are vastly more informed by modern science. We're not going back to those days."*

In the wake of the Los Angeles fires, it is important to distinguish between the types and goals of wildfire risk reduction strategies across different ecosystems. Whereas many coniferous forests have suffered from a fire deficit—where decades of over-suppression have led to too little fire, resulting in overly dense fuel buildup—Southern California's chaparral is experiencing the opposite problem: too much fire almost all of which is being sparked by unintended human-caused ignitions (utility equipment, cars, machinery, arson, etc). Now, many chaparral landscapes are burning far more

frequently than their natural 30-50+ year fire return interval, leading to ecosystem degradation, loss of native vegetation, and increased fire hazards. This is why prescribed fire, a key tool for restoring fire balance in forests, is less often the land manager's tool of choice in chaparral. Instead, fire management in these environments prioritizes strategies that reduce ignition potential and improve suppression capabilities for community defense.

Fuelbreaks are one such tool, but their role in chaparral ecosystems must be understood in context. While they are not a panacea—especially in extreme wind-driven events like the Santa Ana-fueled Palisades and Eaton fires, where fire spreads independently of fuel loads—they remain a critical component of fire response. Under less severe conditions, fuelbreaks can slow fire progression, provide vital access points for firefighters, and increase the likelihood of successful suppression efforts. However, their effectiveness depends on aggressive maintenance. If left unmanaged, fuelbreaks can become overgrown with invasive grasses, which thrive in disturbed areas and burn even more readily than native chaparral species, ultimately increasing fire risk rather than reducing it.

While much of the policy focus on permitting reform has centered on landscape-scale fuels treatments in forested environments, fuel break projects in chaparral and mixed landscapes near the WUI face many of the same bureaucratic hurdles. The Fix Our Forests Act makes a difference in these ecosystems as well, by streamlining environmental review processes for critical wildfire mitigation projects, including fuelbreak maintenance. A case in point is the Angeles National Forest, which itself burned in the Eaton Fire. The Forestwide Fuelbreak Maintenance Strategy, an 8,685-acre project, initially began as an Environmental Assessment in 2020 but faced significant delays.[23] Recognizing the urgency, land managers shifted to using multiple Categorical Exclusions (CEs) to expedite approval. Some of these exclusions were ultimately granted in 2025—four years after the project was first proposed and too late to make a difference in the Eaton Fire.[24] This example underscores the importance of permitting reform in ensuring that fire mitigation efforts are not stalled by bureaucratic red tape. By making it easier to approve and implement these projects, the Fix Our Forests Act helps improve wildfire preparedness and resilience, not just in conifer forests but across a range of fire-prone landscapes, including the chaparral of Southern California.

Finally, The Fix Our Forests Act expands CEs for hazard tree management adjacent to power lines from 10 to 150 feet and sets automatic approval timeframes for some plans prepared under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act. In the wake of frequent utility-caused ignitions, including those in chaparral ecosystems, removing any barriers to vegetation management around electrical infrastructure can be enormously valuable.

## Leveraging Cutting Edge Technology for Improved Decision Making

Although advances in wildfire technology hold great promise, available technological services are highly fragmented across more than 50 federal programs, all with strained budgets. Simply put, *the technology is available, but the government currently lacks the ability to get tools and actionable information in the hands of those who desperately need it, when they need it.* To address this pressing need, the recent landmark Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission Report calls for a

[23] https://www.fs.usda.gov/sopa/components/reports/sopa-110501-2025-01.pdf
[24] Ibid.

centralized federal Wildfire Intelligence Center to leverage cutting edge technology and improve the interoperability and effectiveness of the many entities engaged in wildfire work.[25]

The Fix Our Forests Act establishes such a Center. The "Fireshed Center" ("Wildfire Intelligence Center" in the Senate version) provides technologically-enabled decision support across the entire wildfire lifecycle of prevention, suppression, and recovery efforts. Wildfires burn across jurisdictional lines, necessitating cooperation between local, state, tribal, and federal agencies, as well as between the private and public sectors. The complexity of wildfire management across natural landscapes and the built environment demands a coordinated approach that ensures resources, expertise, and decision-making processes are effectively aligned to mitigate risk and improve response efforts. Whether it's a local fire station, the National Park Service, Forest Service Hotshots, Tribes, prescribed burn association, firewise community, or public health departments, every organization should have real-time access to the best weather modeling, fire-spread and smoke modeling, fire and fuel treatment history, and common operating pictures available so they can plan effectively, operate safely, and collaborate across jurisdictions. The Center will help break down silos and create the coordinated, whole-of-government response necessary to reduce the devastation caused by megafires.

Crucially, the Fix Our Forests Act would assist jurisdictions with the pre-positioning of wildfire suppression personnel and assets based on real-time risk—a shortcoming that severely hampered the initial response to the Palisades Fire and affects countless communities in the WUI that have less resources.[26]

Currently, inadequate data integration and decision support for fire and land management agencies result in precious resources being spent on scattered, uncoordinated efforts—often referred to as "random acts of restoration." By centralizing data collection while broadening data access, providing advanced wildfire risk assessments, and supporting decision-making across multiple agencies and jurisdictions, the Fireshed Center would improve coordination in wildfire mitigation as well. This is more than just an administrative function—it is a force multiplier. To meet our restoration and wildfire mitigation goals effectively, we must move beyond reactive strategies and fully leverage the power of data and technology. The Center represents a necessary step in achieving that transformation, and Sec. 302 of the Fix Our Forests Act goes even further to improve performance accountability by requiring publicly available annual reports on hazardous fuel treatments that include information on treatment types, cost per acre, whether treatments were inside of the WUI, and the effectiveness of treatments in reducing wildfire risk. These reporting requirements are an important step towards ensuring scarce resources are funding the highest-ROI treatments with real metrics for accountability.

Beyond improving immediate response capabilities, the updated Fireshed Center will provide support for Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs), wildfire smoke and air quality monitoring, and post-fire recovery efforts, including vegetation and watershed restoration, debris flow prevention, and flood mitigation. While CWPPs are a key tool in wildfire preparedness, their current planning process is slow and resource-intensive. Los Angeles has been working on its CWPP since 2020 and has yet to finalize it—despite having significant resources and technical expertise.[27] For smaller, less-resourced

[25] https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/wfmmc-final-report-09-2023.pdf
[26] https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-02-21/lafds-failure-to-pre-deploy-before-palisades-fire-a-times-investigation
[27] https://www.npr.org/2025/01/15/nx-s1-5256348/los-angeles-fires-safety-evacuation-improvement-preparation

communities across the country, this process is even more challenging. The Fix Our Forests Act helps address these barriers by providing technical assistance through the Fireshed Center and Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program, ensuring all communities, regardless of size or resources, have access to the support needed to reduce their wildfire risk.

While no technological silver bullet exists that can stop 80-mile-per-hour ember casts like those seen in Los Angeles, improved predictive modeling, real-time risk assessment, and strategic pre-positioning of suppression resources can still make a meaningful difference in reducing wildfire damage. High-wind-driven fires will always present significant challenges, but better intelligence, coordination, and proactive mitigation strategies can limit their destructive impact. By equipping communities with better predictive tools, improved coordination, and access to real-time fire intelligence, the Fix Our Forests Act provides critical resources to help cities like Los Angeles—and fire-prone communities across the country—prepare for and mitigate the impacts of future wildfires.

The Fix Our Forests Act also creates a multi-agency public-private wildfire technology testbed program that identifies and advances key technologies in a competitive pilot program. Specific priorities include technologies that would advance hazardous fuels reduction treatments, dispatch communications, remote sensing/detection/tracking, safety equipment, thermal mid-wave infrared equipped low earth orbit satellites, and common operating pictures or operational dashboards. 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. The Senate version of the legislation would allow communities to apply for Community Wildfire Defense Grant Funding to deploy such technologies to protect homes and infrastructure in the WUI.

Scaling these solutions as quickly as possible is key to meeting the emergency we are in—we do not have the luxury of continuing R&D and pilots forever. Existing deployments of innovative wildfire technologies have demonstrated their ability to increase the effectiveness of taxpayer-funded programs and are ready to scale nationwide. The Fireshed Center will coordinate with the technology pilot program established in Sec. 303 and streamline procurement processes for wildfire technologies, with the aim of getting these technologies past the demonstration phase and into the hands of operators across the country, regardless of agency.

However, even with procurement assistance, federal fire agencies often lack the appropriate acquisition authorities for acquiring cutting edge solutions from the private sector. These same agencies also lack appropriate budgetary incentives for exploring cost-saving technologies due to the significant separation that exists between fire suppression funding, forest and rangeland management funding, and IT/technology budgeting. To help address these gaps, Congress may wish to authorize existing funding to be used for the acquisition of key wildfire technologies. We are happy to work with the Committee on strengthening the bill's role in getting proven technologies to those who need them.

## Conclusion

While the Fix Our Forests Act is not a panacea for the wildfire crisis, it represents a critical and necessary step toward a more proactive and science-driven approach to wildfire management. This legislation lays the foundation for a more resilient future by prioritizing resilience in the built environment, accelerating landscape restoration, modernizing wildfire risk decision-making with cutting-edge technology, and improving coordination across agencies and communities.

Looking beyond the Fix Our Forests Act, wildfire policy is only as effective as the workforce that implements it. Federal wildland firefighters are among the most dedicated public servants in the country, yet we continue to ask the impossible of them—longer fire seasons, grueling conditions, and life-threatening risks—all while failing to provide staffing and organizational structure they deserve. Congress must also act swiftly to ensure we have the firefighting and land management force necessary to meet the escalating wildfire threat and "fix our forests".

No single policy will eliminate the risk of catastrophic wildfires, but the Fix Our Forests Act advances the policies and practices needed to reduce megafire threats, protect communities, and restore the health of fire-adapted landscapes. We look forward to working with the Committee as it considers this legislation and look forward to answering your questions.

Sincerely,

Matt Weiner
CEO, Megafire Action