



STATEMENT OF  
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BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS,  
AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES WASHINGTON D.C.

**IMPACTS OF THE 2017 WILDFIRES IN THE UNITED STATES**

MARCH 20, 2018

Chairman Barletta, Ranking member Titus and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to testify today about the impacts of the 2017 Wildfires in the United States. I am Chief Eric Holly, Deputy Fire Warden/Deputy Director of Emergency Services for Stanislaus County, California. In addition to my normal day-to-day duties, I am a Fire/Rescue Operational Area Coordinator and Emergency Management Mutual Aid (EMMA) Coordinator for Stanislaus County.

Stanislaus County is located in the Central Valley of California and in the southern portion of California's Mutual Aid System, Region IV. Within the Stanislaus County Operational Area is the Diablo Mountain Range in the Western portion of the county and the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range in the Eastern portion of the county. The county has a population of just over 500,000 people. There are currently twenty-one (21) agencies that have responsibility for fire services within the county. The fire agency staffing models vary from: full time paid career staff, combination paid career and volunteer staff, and fully volunteer staff. They range in size from a one station agency to our largest agency with eleven stations. Some of the fire agencies have contracted for services with other agencies or formed a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) to reduce costs or streamline services. Each agency participates, at some level, in the California Fire/Rescue Mutual Aid System.

During times of emergencies and disasters I am responsible for coordinating the local agency response resources from Stanislaus County to those incidents as well as any requests for assistance that would come from my county should we suffer an emergency or disaster that goes beyond our capabilities. As part of the California Office of Emergency Services (CalOES) Fire/Rescue Mutual Aid and EMMA Systems Stanislaus County, in the past several years alone, has responded by providing fire engines and individual personnel to wildfires statewide: from the border of Mexico to the border of Oregon, to the State of Washington, the State of Montana, and Puerto Rico for Hurricane Maria. Personnel from multiple disciplines including: Fire, Law Enforcement, Emergency Medical Services, Animal Services, Public works, Building Department, Public Health, and County Administration Departments have all been deployed to assist other Operational Areas in their time of need.

### **Impacts of the 2017 Wildfires in the United States**

Stanislaus County agencies continue to support the California Mutual Aid System however, as in years past Stanislaus County has found itself unable to fill some of the requests received for mutual aid coming from the major wildfires throughout the state during 2017. Agencies are only able to assist so much before they have a drawdown of their own resources to an exhaustion level. We have found ourselves turning down requests more and more each year for these reasons. Some of our agencies that have full time paid career firefighters have had to reduce staff and close fire station due to lack of funding. Volunteer fire agencies have been

having trouble keeping staff levels up for years and what staffing they do have fluctuates with the season.

Most of our volunteer fire agencies are in rural, agricultural areas of the county. During harvest season and other specific times of the year many volunteer firefighters are committed to their farms and ranches and have a limited capabilities to respond to calls for service within their fire district. Without a sufficient response in their home district those agencies are unable to send out fire apparatus and personnel for large wildfires because they must be able to provide services for their own district.

Even with these challenges counties have been able to put fire equipment on the road in times of need. When a large wildfire starts, county Operational Area Coordinators begin assessing their county for any current large incidents that may prevent an out of county response. They begin polling their local agencies for their capability to respond to the larger incident. All of this information is then forwarded to the California Region IV Fire/Rescue Regional Mutual Aid Coordinator.

Over recent years, responses from the Stanislaus County Operational Area Fire resources to statewide incidents have increased at about the same rate as all other Operational Areas within Region IV. This includes fire apparatus as well as individual personnel to assist with the operations and management of the incidents. Agencies respond multiple times throughout the year to these incidents and many times are demobilized from one incident only to be sent directly to another.

At times we will not have enough equipment or trained personnel in our county to fill requests for Strike Teams of engines to an out of county wildfire. Strike Teams are multiple units of the same kind and type of equipment with a leader. When this occurs the Operational Area Coordinators have called their neighboring counties to pull together enough resources to be able to fulfill the request and respond. Other times the coordinators will put together multiple resources of different kind and type of equipment with a leader these are known as a Task Force and make them available to respond in place of Strike Teams if it is appropriate for the incident. Without the coordination between neighboring jurisdictions we would see far less Strike Teams and Task Forces responding to wildfires than we see today.

We continue to work locally with state and Federal agencies on mitigating local hazards through planning, educating the public, training and exercising for all hazards. Through federal grant funding as a sub-grantee of the Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP) Stanislaus County has been able to assist all nine of its cities within the county and many of the counties special districts with their hazard mitigation planning. The goal which is meeting the core capabilities of the National Preparedness is necessary for resilient communities. The devastation created

by a wildfire can cripple a community leaving it vulnerable to secondary type events such as landslides.

Weed abatement and fuels reduction is an ongoing task for us. Each year agencies spend numerous hours identifying and notifying property owners of hazardous situations including the fire hazards of overgrown and uncontrolled vegetation. While this practice is time consuming it is vital to reducing the fuel loads of vegetation fires and creates Defensible Space around structures to assist responding fire personnel. We constantly struggle to keep up with requests from the public regarding fire hazards. With all the responsibilities of fire agencies, many of them are reactive rather than proactive to vegetation management issues because they do not have the staffing. Some of our county fire agencies boundaries are within the State Responsibility Area (SRA) and they have a mutually beneficial working relationship with our state fire agency, Cal FIRE and their mitigation and public education efforts benefit from that relationship.

Public Education has some of the same areas of concern. Staffing challenges and funding for the education programs continue to be a concern. When agencies have staffing issues for emergency responses public education suffers. We continue to take lessons learned and best practices from wildland fire incidents and implement them in county.

It is important to remember that we need to invest our money and resources up front. Investment in creating emergency plans, mitigation programs and public education will save lives, property, and environment. Increasing staffing or pre-positioning fire equipment during Red Flag Warnings or other high probability events likely lessen the likelihood of the incident growing into a major wildland incident. By having more equipment staged and staffed and closer to the area of wildland fire concern a quicker response can be had. While the California Fire/Rescue Mutual Aid System works well equipment can only get there fast. Distance and time are not our friends when it comes to a wildland fire.

The Stanislaus County Operational Area did not have a major wildland fire incident in 2017. It very well could have. We like many of California's counties feel lucky that we were not affected like other California counties. Much work has been done to improve public safety, wildland fire response, and recovery in our county but there is still much more to be done. We have had major wildland fires in our county in the past and we will have them again. It's not a question of if but when. We look forward to continued cooperation and coordination between local, State, and Federal resources.

All agencies in Stanislaus County attempt to educate themselves on Wildland Urban Interface scenarios and train to the latest standards. Training is conducted annually and we continue to look back at lessons learned to ensure safety and efficiency in our wildland responses. But we

could do more. One area we look for improvement in is the training of personnel to fill all positions on the fire engines with certified and qualified individuals for out of county responses to wildfires. Some of the smaller agencies do not have enough personnel certified and qualified at certain fire positions to be able to sustain an out of county response. We have been working toward increasing the number of staff but with volunteer attrition rates just keeping up is challenging. Recruiting and maintaining volunteer firefighters is a challenge. Some agencies have been seeing success with the use of the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grants. This funding has made a positive impact and we hope to see it continue.

Additionally, most if not all agencies have been the recipient of the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) Program funding. Specifically, the funding of the communications equipment to allow for interoperability between agencies on emergency incidents has been beneficial. Without this funding many of our fire agencies would not have the proper communication equipment to respond statewide as part of the Mutual Aid System. Again, this type of funding has made a positive impact on local agencies' ability to respond safely to incidents within their jurisdictional boundaries as well as participate in the California Mutual Aid System.

We must continue to emphasize education and training to strengthen our ability to respond safely and effectively locally and statewide to wildland fire events. But without properly well maintained equipment we would be unable to assist. There are many pieces to puzzle and without one of them our statewide response would be hampered.

## **Conclusion**

I thank you for the opportunity today to testify about the impacts of the 2017 Wildfires in the United States. Pre-disaster mitigation, emergency preparedness and training, an effective timely response, and disaster recovery are all important to the safety and well-being of our local communities. The continued commitment to the coordination of these at the local, state and federal levels is critical to being successful in providing for a safe and healthy community.

By continue to build on our successes and learned lessons we will build a better fire service. We must cooperate, coordinate, collaborate and communicate for this to keep our communities safe and resilient.