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*Are FEMA's Assistance Programs Adequately Designed to
Assist Communities Before, During, and After Wildfire*

Chair Titus, Ranking Member Webster, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share Butte County's observations and experiences working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and its programs on natural disasters and events related to wildfires. Butte County is located in northern California approximately 90 miles north of Sacramento with a western boundary of the Sacramento River and an eastern boundary of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The majority of the County's approximately 209,000 residents live in five incorporated towns or cities. The rest of our citizens live in small, unincorporated rural communities. The County encompasses 1,636 square miles of terrain with an elevation that spans from 90 to 7,800 feet above sea level, making our geography incredibly diverse. Over half the County's land is within a moderate, high, or very high fire severity zone as designated by the State of California. The eastern-most portions of the County are within the Plumas and Lassen National Forests.

Unfortunately, Butte County is no stranger to disasters. In the last five years alone, the County experienced twelve natural disasters, including seven federally declared disasters. Currently, Butte County is actively managing four disasters including three with federal declarations.

In 2018, the Camp Fire struck Butte County and became the most deadly and devastating wildfire in California's history, burning for 17 days, destroying 154,000 acres of public and private property, over 14,000 homes, and 5,000 businesses and other structures. The fire forced the evacuation of more than 52,000 residents, injured 17 people including 5 firefighters, and claimed 85 lives.

In 2020, California experienced its worst fire season on record as fires burned across the entire State. Again, Butte County was the site of the most deadly and destructive fire of the season, the

North Complex Fire. The fire started in Plumas County and burned into Butte County more than three weeks later destroying 2,300 structures, including over 1,500 homes, burning approximately 125,000 acres in Butte County, and claiming 16 lives.

In 2021, the historic Dixie Fire, which started in Butte County, burned into four other counties destroying 1,329 structures and claiming one life. The Dixie Fire burned nearly one million acres across northern California to become the largest single wildfire in California's history.

These wildfires, along with other federally declared disasters pertaining to drought and flooding, have tested the limits of disaster response not only at the local County level, but at the state, and federal level as well.

I have experience in Butte County's Emergency Operations Center in response to numerous wildfires over the last decade. I currently function as the Camp Fire Recovery Director and have been in this role since shortly after the 2018 Camp Fire. The County still maintains a Disaster Recovery Operation structure in response to the 2018 Camp Fire and I work directly with FEMA staff in the ongoing recovery effort. My testimony is focused on disaster recovery after the 2018 Camp Fire and the 2020 North Complex Fire in Butte County as that is my recent, direct experience with disaster response and recovery related to wildfires.

FEMA assistance is critical for local governments in response and recovery from disasters. The assistance provided to California counties by the State of California through its Governor's Office of Emergency Services and other State agencies is also vital. Butte County simply cannot support the response and recovery from recent wildfires without the support of the State of California and the federal government through FEMA and other federal agencies.

The Stafford Act and FEMA are intended to assist areas prone to disasters, in particular disasters related to hurricanes, storms, and floods. However, as the severity of wildfire disasters increases, there is tremendous opportunity for the Stafford Act, FEMA, and other federal agencies to change in a way that better serves the specific needs of communities before and after wildfires. I have outlined some of those opportunities in this testimony, including changes to FEMA Individual Assistance and Public Assistance. Now is the time to learn from recent wildfire disasters and update the federal approach to disaster prevention, response, and recovery in wildfire-prone communities.

INDIVIDUAL ASSISTANCE AFTER A WILDFIRE

1. Eligibility for Individual Assistance

Disaster survivors must document residency to be eligible for Individual Assistance from FEMA. However, prior to a disaster, some residents can be precariously housed, nearly homeless, or living in non-traditional household settings, such as multiple families living together. Residents who were living with family or friends but not on the official lease, or families living in homes left by deceased family members who never officially completed the property transfer, could not prove residency after being displaced by the 2018 Camp. These individuals and families were left homeless after the fire. These families and individuals often have the greatest need for resources after a disaster. Yet they cannot qualify for assistance because they cannot prove residency in the disaster area. The Stafford Act should be amended to clarify eligibility for FEMA Individual Assistance to disaster survivors who lack clear documentation of residency. This would create an opportunity to assist individuals who are often the most desperate after a

disaster, preventing disaster homelessness and creating a path toward recovery for underserved families and individuals.

2. Direct Housing Assistance after a Wildfire

FEMA provides direct housing assistance to eligible disaster survivors through its Individuals and Households Program. The 2018 Camp Fire burned nearly 14,000 residences, approximately 14 percent of the County's entire housing stock. FEMA approved direct housing assistance including the construction of FEMA group sites where fire survivors lived in manufactured housing units or travel trailers. Yet, it took more than nine months after the Camp Fire before the first official group site was ready for fire survivors. In the meantime, fire survivors lived in hotels, tents and trailers, or moved from place to place. So much time lapsed before FEMA group sites were available that the 1,200 eligible households indicating a need for housing dropped to 680 as people moved from the area and many resettled permanently. FEMA has an opportunity to work with states and local governments to identify ways to construct temporary housing sites more quickly after a wildfire.

The FEMA manufactured housing units can be set up on individual properties to eliminate the need for large group sites. However, the housing units used for the 2018 Camp Fire survivors did not meet the California building codes for fire safety and could not be placed into the Camp Fire burn scar, which is located in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). This also prevented the units occupied by Camp Fire survivors at the FEMA group sites from being sold to those families as a permanent housing solution. At the time, County staff inquired about getting WUI compliant units and were told they did not exist within the FEMA system. It appears the FEMA housing model is directed more toward flood-prone areas and not areas prone to wildfires. Providing

manufactured housing units that comply with fire safety measures that can be placed temporarily and permanently in the WUI is critical to providing housing assistance after a wildfire.

3. Disaster Case Management after a Wildfire

Immediate Disaster Case Management (IDCM) may be approved by FEMA to assist disaster survivors. IDCM was approved after the 2018 Camp Fire for 90 days, but this short period did not meet the needs of fire survivors. Wildfires can have a long response period. Fires may burn for weeks and communities may be under evacuation even longer while areas are made safe to repopulate. For example, areas burned by the 2018 Camp Fire were evacuated for over a month. Additionally, owners with debris from burned structures cannot return to the property to live in temporary housing until the debris is removed and the property is certified clean. The California Governor's Office of Emergency Services completed the structural debris removal approximately one year after the Camp Fire, which eventually created an opportunity for owners to return to their properties to live in temporary housing while rebuilding. IDCM is needed while fire survivors navigate the near-term steps in recovery. Ideally, a smooth transition would exist between IDCM and the Disaster Case Management Program (DCMP). Unfortunately, what occurred after the 2018 Camp Fire was an abrupt gap in case management support for fire survivors with no transition and then a wait for another case manager through the DCMP. Wildfire disasters often lead to hurried, traumatic evacuation experiences followed by the complete destruction of a home. This layered trauma is exacerbated when recovery services like IDCM and the DCMP are difficult to navigate.

The formula for determining how many case managers are needed for a DCMP does not appear to adequately serve disaster survivors after a wildfire. Just over 8,300 households requested

support in their recovery after the 2018 Camp Fire, yet the County was allotted only 15 DCMP case managers. Eventually, an additional eight case managers were approved to serve fire survivors, but the caseloads still remained overwhelming. Butte County eventually entered into an agreement using AmeriCorps volunteers who served 1,200 Camp Fire survivors who had been on a waiting list for over one year. The County's program added an additional 52 case managers to meet the demand for recovery support.

Navigating disaster recovery is challenging even for resilient survivors with financial resources. Wildfires often burn through rural, disadvantaged communities where many fire survivors need additional support for recovery. Providing reliable, coordinated case management for wildfire survivors is critical to rebuilding these rural communities. FEMA has an opportunity to coordinate with State and local governments to understand the types of communities most often devastated by wildfires and design case management programs to support for those disaster survivors.

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE AFTER A WILDFIRE

1. Reimbursement for Consecutive Disasters

When communities, such as Butte County, experience consecutive major natural disasters, resources become strained, not only within the local government, but within the community at large. This limits the ability to respond to and recover from the immediate disasters as well as any future disasters. Congress has an opportunity to amend the Stafford Act to increase the federal reimbursement rate to 90 percent for disasters occurring to the same region in consecutive years. This additional reimbursement substantially increases the ability of the local government and the community to respond and recover from all the disasters.

2. Timelines for Submitting Claims for Reimbursement

Rural and suburban local governments often have limited emergency management staff to navigate the sophisticated process of receiving FEMA public assistance for emergency and permanent work. Local governments typically divert existing staff from their work serving local residents or hire temporary disaster workers to document and submit expenses for reimbursement. For example, Butte County had just 90 days from its scoping meeting to complete this work for the emergency protective measures after the 2020 North Complex Fire. FEMA has an opportunity to amend the Public Assistance Program and Policy Guide to account for the unique nature of wildfires, which may burn for weeks, causing lengthy evacuations and requiring mutual aid resources from hundreds of jurisdictions as areas are made safe for repopulation and recovery.

3. Debris Removal after a Wildfire

Debris removal activities, such as clearance, removal, and disposal, are eligible activities according to FEMA's Public Assistance Program and Policy Guide. Debris removal is critical after a wildfire because the debris from burned structures contains toxic materials and must be removed and properly disposed. Additionally, burnt hazardous trees pose a risk of falling and becoming fuel for future fires. The removal of burnt hazardous trees was not initially included in the authorized debris removal activities after the 2018 Camp Fire. It took nearly one year after the fire for FEMA to approve a program to remove burnt hazardous trees. Now, removal of structural ash and debris, along with burnt hazardous trees, are often approved together for wildfires. It is encouraging to see FEMA learn the unique needs of wildfire disasters in this case.

Another opportunity to address debris removal after a wildfire disaster is to make eligible the removal of burnt hazardous trees that pose an increased risk to become fuel for future fires. Standing burnt trees exacerbate future fires by precipitating spotting where segments of branches can break off and fly into the convection column and cast embers, essentially making the trees act like Roman Candle. The embers from the standing burnt trees can be carried miles away, which is exactly what happened in the 2018 Camp Fire. The heavy fuel loading of fallen, dead trees can lead to extreme fire behavior in future fires as grass, brush, and conifer reproduction begins to grow in between the fallen, dead trees.

Debris removal is often a critical first step toward recovery for local residents and communities. FEMA requires debris removal be in the public's interest to be eligible for reimbursement. A Health Officer must declare a local health emergency finding that debris removal is necessary to reduce a threat to public health and safety. This emergency must stay in place while debris removal activities are completed. Debris removal after a wildfire can take months, yet the local health emergency must be renewed every 30 days. If the local health emergency lapses, debris removal activities become ineligible. This timing can be difficult for small jurisdictions where governing bodies often do not meet every week or even every two weeks. FEMA has an opportunity to assist local governments by reducing administrative hurdles and increasing the timeframe for renewing the local health emergency.

4. Debris Removal in National Forests

A local health emergency finding that debris removal is necessary to reduce a threat to public health and safety becomes the basis for a local ordinance requiring private property owners to properly remove and dispose of debris after a wildfire. Local ordinances apply to privately

owned property, but do not apply to state and federally owned land including National Forests. Significant opportunities exist for FEMA and the United States Forest Service to coordinate and ensure burnt hazardous trees in National Forests are removed so they do not present a danger to the public. Unfortunately, FEMA does not currently allow USFS property to be eligible for debris removal activities even when the trees are in a local government right-of-away. Land in National Forests burned in both the 2018 Camp Fire and the 2020 North Complex Fire in Butte County, leaving thousands of burnt hazardous trees along the roadways. Numerous fires in 2021 including the Dixie and Caldor Fires burned in National Forests as well and will face the same issue if it is not resolved.

5. Permanent Work

Public infrastructure may be damaged or destroyed in a wildfire and is eligible for permanent repairs funded by FEMA Public Assistance. While building back a public facility destroyed in a fire may be relatively straight forward, recovering other types of infrastructure is more challenging. Specifically, permanent infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, can be further damaged during portions of the recovery and restoration effort, and for extended periods of time, even years. Debris removal efforts after the 2018 Camp Fire and the 2020 North Complex Fire put hundreds of heavily loaded trucks on roads not constructed for that type of truck traffic over a sustained amount of time. Debris removal after a wildfire often takes place during the wet winter and spring months that follow fire season, which exacerbates the damaged caused by heavy truck traffic. Roads simply crumble under these circumstances. Additionally, private utilities traveled through the area restoring power, telecommunications, and water service to destroyed areas. The damages from these routine recovery efforts for debris removal should be considered when

FEMA assesses a road for permanent recovery work so the road can be returned to pre-disaster conditions.

After the 2020 North Complex Fire, FEMA was reluctant to approve permanent work for road repairs and wanted to shift those costs to the contractors who performed debris removal or to the private utility companies restoring services to the area. This left Butte County fighting for assistance to repair crumbled roads. Butte County estimates \$35.5 million is needed to pay the local share of costs for road repairs and for repairs that were denied by FEMA. That \$35.5 is on top of \$46.6 million in unmet road repair needs or local costs after the 2018 Camp Fire. Disaster upon disaster in Butte County is creating an infrastructure repair problem that could take decades to address even with adequate funding. If roads are left in disrepair after a disaster, it causes generational impacts to the infrastructure as local governments lack the adequate local funds for road repair and maintenance to address the disaster and recovery repairs while still maintaining the rest of the road system throughout the jurisdictions. Traditional infrastructure funding is not designed to fix disaster damage. FEMA should fund permanent work to return infrastructure to pre-disaster conditions.

I have outlined numerous opportunities to update the Stafford Act and FEMA's Public Assistance Program and Policy Guide to more fully address wildfires as these types of national disasters increase in frequency and severity. State and local governments are a partner to FEMA in this effort and together we can frame the best practice guidelines for assisting communities before and after wildfires.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee.