U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON

SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY

Opening Statement

Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren (D-CA)

Full Committee Hearing:
The State of Federal Wildland Fire Science: Examining Opportunities for Further Research & Coordination

June 29, 2021

Good morning and thank you Chairwoman Johnson for holding this timely hearing on wildland fire science, and for allowing me to take the gavel.

It is clear: the 2021 fire season has already begun, and it's on pace to be much worse than the historic season observed across the West last year. Already, almost 200,000 more acres of American wildland have burned than by this point in time in 2020 – a 10-year high. Firefighters in my home state of California are currently battling at least six large wildfires throughout the state. As a Californian, this is cause for alarm. In 2020 alone, the U.S. saw record wildfires burn 10 million acres of land – over four million of which were in California. In 2018, Californian fires only burned two million acres. The cycle of extreme heat and drought in the West have increased extreme wildfire conditions, adding nine more days of high fire potential every year since 2000.

As the risk for catastrophic wildfire grows, so should our ability to forecast wildfires and mitigate fire risk. Today's hearing presents an opportunity to discuss the current state of wildland fire research and how we use it to improve our understanding of conditions in the field. We will also discuss gaps in the science and identify opportunitites for further federal investment and coordination. Federal programs like the U.S. Drought Monitor are instrumental in helping our wildland managers prepare for worsening fire seasons. This is just one example of how enhanced coordination among science agencies, and with operational managers, can lead to actionable science. With dedicated authorities and investments in wildfire science, we can develop additional capability for real-time detection of fire ignition, and even deepen our understanding of wildfire fuels. I was proud to cosponsor an amendment, with my colleague Mr. Perlmutter, on wildfire resilience research funding in the NSF for the Future Act. It was a great start to what we can do to strengthen wildfire research, but we must do more.

It is not just unwise for Congress not to act to bolster our wildfire research, it is dangerous. Throwing ourselves at each megafire is neither a near-term nor long-term solution. That is why I am drafting legislation in this Committee to improve the understanding, prediction, and management of wildland fires through robust research initiatives. This bill will also enhance

federal interagency collaboration and coordination to include science agencies in federal wildland fire response. I hope this bill will also lead to our federal science agencies working closely with fire managers to ensure that wildfire science can be operationalized to mitigate wildfire risk.

We are fortunate to have witnesses today whose testimony will inform this legislation. Joining us are academic researchers who use information provided by agencies like NOAA, NASA, and the EPA to build out America's wildfire research capacity. We look forward to hearing from them about opportunities for areas of further investment in wildfire science. I would also like to extend a warm welcome to Dr. Craig Clements who is a professor at San Jose State University located in my district. Dr. Clements is the Director of SJSU's Wildfire Interdisciplinary Research Center, which is a leader in wildfire research. I look forward to hearing his testimony about the importance of supporting interdisciplinary wildfire research. We are also fortunate to have with us today some of the bravest people facing the wildfire crisis: our first responders. Forest managers and firefighters intimately understand which innovations best support on-the-ground needs.

This hearing is a critical first step in creating a truly whole-of-government response to wildfire risk that connects research to operations. We are encouraged by the Biden Administration's emphasis on climate resilience and robust funding in the President's Budget Request for our science agencies to tackle extreme weather events. This leaves us ample room to work with appropriators to ensure funding levels in keeping with the magnitude of the wildfire challenge we face. With that, I want to thank our witnesses for their time this morning. At this point, I would like to yield to the Ranking Member for any comments he may wish to make.