



Opening Statement of Chairman Frank Lucas

Full Committee Markup
H.R. 369, H.R. 4090, and H.R. 4143

June 21, 2023

Thank you all for joining us at this markup.

We're here to consider three bills that will improve our ability to respond quickly and efficiently to emergencies and disasters across the country.

First up is H.R. 4090, the Fire Grants and Safety Act of 2023. We held a hearing on this topic a few weeks ago and heard from witnesses representing fire departments across America on the value of the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) and two key programs it runs: Assistance to Firefighters (AFG) and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER).

The Assistance to Firefighters program provides direct support to local emergency responders through training and equipment, as well as facility upgrades and vehicle purchases.

The SAFER program helps local fire departments find and train firefighters, so they are better able to respond to emergencies.

These programs are incredibly valuable to our communities. Many small and rural fire departments like those in my district struggle to support and maintain forces or to provide necessary training and equipment for their firefighters.

These fire grant programs ensure small and rural departments have access to the resources they need in order to provide sufficient fire suppression and emergency medical support.

I'd like to thank Rep. Kean for introducing this bipartisan bill to reauthorize USFA and both the AFG and SAFER programs. I'd also like to thank my Science Committee colleagues, Congressional Fire Services Caucus co-chairs, and numerous external stakeholders for their critical feedback as we worked to draft this reauthorization.

Next is H.R. 369, the Wildland Fire Communications and Information Dissemination Act. This bill, introduced by Rep. Young Kim of California, was directly informed by feedback from first responders who have encountered communications problems while fighting wildfires.

We're right in the middle of wildfire season, and I know this is a critical issue for many of us on this committee.

Oklahoma may be better known for its tornados, but wildfires burn hundreds of thousands of acres of land in my home state every year.

First responders there face unique communications challenges, particularly in rural and tribal areas where wireless and broadband coverage is extremely limited.

Delays and failures during emergency response operations could have catastrophic and fatal consequences. It is critical to ensure that our ability to share information during emergencies is instant, resilient, and redundant.

This bill helps us build stronger systems by directing the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) to research and improve communication coordination standards among firefighters, fire management response officials, and the National Interagency Fire Center.

It also authorizes NIST to carry out live and virtual field testing of equipment, software, and other technologies to improve communications during wildfires.

These measures will give our first responders better tools to fight wildland fires, helping to save lives and prevent unnecessary property damage. So I urge you all to support this bipartisan bill.

The last bill on our agenda today is one sponsored by our Ranking Member – the National Construction Safety Team Act of 2023.

The National Construction Safety Team, or NCST, is a program run by NIST to investigate major building disasters and failures so that we can develop better construction standards in the future.

Following NIST's investigation of the Twin Towers' collapse after September 11, they issued recommendations that have significantly impacted how we design and construct buildings, making them safer and more durable.

Currently, NIST is investigating the 2021 collapse of the Surfside Towers in South Florida, which killed nearly 100 people.

And while NIST does exceptional work in these investigations, their scope is limited to building failures. Ranking Member Lofgren's bill will expand that authority to general infrastructure failures, which currently aren't investigated in this way.

This is a smart bill that will ensure we can utilize NIST's unique expertise to better understand any failures in buildings, roads, bridges, dams, and other infrastructure, and – most importantly – develop best practices and guidance so that we can avert future tragedies.

Just like the other two bipartisan bills before us today, this is a commonsense, practical policy that supports science and innovation to improve people's lives.

I'm proud to join Ranking Member Lofgren as an original cosponsor of this legislation, and I'm looking forward to reporting it out of committee today, along with our other two bills.

With that, I yield to the Gentlewoman from California for her opening remarks.