



Opening Statement of Investigations and Oversight Subcommittee Chairman Jay Obernolte

Subcommittee on Investigations & Oversight Hearing

Examining the Risk: The Dangers of EV Fires for First Responders

February 29, 2024

Good morning. Thank you to Ranking Member Foushee and the other members of our committee for being here.

Today's hearing will examine the growing dangers that electric vehicle fires pose to the American public and the lack of guidance and resources provided to first responders across the country.

For over 100 years, our highways have been dominated by internal combustion engine vehicles. Throughout this time, we have invested resources and expertise to learn the best practices for extinguishing internal combustion engine vehicle fires.

However, within the last two decades we have seen a large increase in the number of EV's on the road. The federal government has pushed for a transition to electric vehicles, incentivizing their development through tax credits and charging station infrastructure grants.

Worldwide there are roughly 3.1 million EVs in operation today. Many experts in the auto industry anticipate that by 2030 there will be nearly 130 million in operation. As the presence of these vehicles continue to grow on our roads, so does the threat and danger of the fires they can produce.

EV fires are fundamentally different from traditional internal combustion engine fires, and they present new dangers that our first responders need to be prepared for. EV fires burn at temperatures far hotter than regular vehicle fires; they produce copious amounts of toxic chemical gases, expose firefighters to the risk of electrocution, and are often inextinguishable for hours or days with the threat of reignition due to thermal runaway.

When an EV either experiences an incident due to a manufacturing defect or is damaged in an accident, the battery that powers the vehicle often has a remaining charge. This stranded energy provides the fuel to keep a battery burning for hours regardless of how much water is poured on it in an attempt to extinguish it.

Unfortunately, the federal government has been deficient in providing guidance and resources to our firefighters and first responders in dealing with this threat. There is currently no uniform guidance on how to address EV fires or protect firefighters from the unique hazards they present, leaving many fire departments to formulate ad hoc solutions.

For example, firefighters in Wakefield, Massachusetts had to dump 20,000 gallons of water over two hours to put out an EV fire. Firefighters in Sacramento, California were forced to submerge an EV in a makeshift pond because the vehicle kept reigniting.

Vehicle manufacturers themselves have not provided uniform solutions to this problem, with some manufacturers recommending that EVs be removed from the road and left to burn themselves out. As you can imagine, in my home state of California, where wildfires are always an ever-present danger, letting an EV just burn itself out is not an option.

Today's hearing is about ensuring the safety of our firefighters and first responders. The hearing also seeks to raise awareness of the dangers of EV battery fires and to ensure that those who help protect and serve our communities are provided with the resources they need to do their jobs. This requires that we understand the threats of EV fires and the substantial differences between EVs and ICE vehicles to develop new best practices and uniform guidance.

Our first witness is Mr. Dan Munsey, Fire Chief of the San Bernardino County Fire Department. Chief Munsey is a constituent and friend. He works diligently for the citizens of San Bernardino County and is uniquely positioned through his leadership role with the International Association of Fire Chiefs to speak to the challenges firefighters face on the ground when confronted with an EV fire. Chief Munsey, we are looking forward to hearing your experiences to better understand how we can address this issue in the future.

Also testifying today is Dr. Judy Jeevarajan, the Vice President and Executive Director of the Electrochemical Safety Research Institute at UL Research Institutes. UL is one of the leading research organizations on EVs and lithium-ion battery fires. Dr. Jeevarajan is an expert on battery technology, and we look forward to hearing from you today.

We hope both of your testimonies will provide solutions to the Committee's concerns with these vehicle fires, and also supply steps that can be taken to provide resources and guidance to first responders.

Thank you for your willingness to be here. I now recognize Ranking Member Foushee for her opening statement.