

STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE

THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

“Courage Under Fire: Examining Government Preparedness and Response to  
Wildfires in California”

Submitted

By

Federal Emergency Management Agency

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Washington, D.C. 20472

August 20, 2019

## **Introduction:**

Good morning, Chairman Rouda, Ranking Member Comer, and Congresswoman Hill and Members of the subcommittee. My name is Robert Fenton, and I am the Regional Administrator for the Region IX office of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) located in Oakland, California. Our office leads all-hazard support to the states of Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, and the U.S. Pacific territories. I would like to thank you for this opportunity to discuss FEMA's role in the wildfires of 2017 and 2018, and the importance of planning for wildfires and mitigating their destruction.

FEMA partners with our colleagues in federal land management agencies, state, local, tribal and territorial emergency management, as well as firefighters at all levels of government – some of whom are testifying at today's hearing – to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate the devastating impacts of wildfires. We are all part of the team, we all play an important role, and we are all dedicated to saving lives and protecting properties.

Today, I will share with you our Agency's experience with wildfire activities over the last two years, and discuss how we can support efforts of states, territories, and tribal nations to plan for and mitigate the impacts destructive wildfires have on people, homes, businesses, and infrastructure in fire prone areas.

## **2017 and 2018 Fire Seasons**

Last year in California, where my office is located, the wildfires were devastating. We saw the largest wildfire in U.S. history, in terms of acres burned in the Mendocino Complex, and the deadliest fire, the Camp Fire. While wildfires are eventually contained and extinguished, the impacts on people, homes, businesses, and critical infrastructure will continue for years to come. The increased risks of debris flow and enduring flood risks following wildland fires are very real. In January 2018, Southern California witnessed devastating floods and debris flows that took an additional 21 lives and damaged homes, commercial properties, and infrastructure. Communities that burned in the last few years are now working to stabilize burned areas, prevent erosion, and mitigate flood risks following fires.

## **Resources to Fight Wildfires**

When wildfires occur, the local first responders which include county, state, and federal firefighters, lead the fire suppression fight. If a wildfire burning on a State or private land progresses to the point where it threatens such destruction as could constitute a major disaster, the state can request, and FEMA can approve, a Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG). FEMA reimburses 75 percent of eligible state, local, and tribal firefighting expenses in the following areas: field camps, equipment use, materials, supplies, and mobilization and demobilization activities attributed to fighting the fire. The intent of the FMAG Program is to prevent uncontrolled fires from becoming

major disasters by providing supplemental funding so firefighters can commit as many resources as necessary, as soon as possible, knowing the majority of fire suppression costs will be covered by the FMAG Program. In 2017 and 2018, FEMA approved 35 FMAG requests in the state of California alone.

If a wildfire continues out of control after an FMAG has been approved and results in significant needs that are not covered by an FMAG, a governor or federally-recognized tribal leader may request that the President declare an emergency or major disaster. An emergency declaration allows FEMA to provide direct federal assistance and resources to the firefight. With a major disaster declaration, the President may authorize a broader array of assistance, including the Individual Assistance Program, the Public Assistance Program, and the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). This escalation from FMAG to major disaster declaration occurred in response to fires in California during 2017 and 2018, notably the Tubbs fire in Santa Rosa, the Carr Fire in Shasta County, the Mendocino Complex Fire in Lake County, the Woolsey Fire in Ventura and Los Angeles Counties, and the Camp Fire in Butte County.

### **Buying Down Risk through Preparedness and Mitigation**

The financial impacts of fires go beyond just the expenditures of funds resulting from FMAGs, emergency, and major disaster declarations. Land management agencies at the local, state, and federal levels, insurance companies, local businesses, and, most significantly, the survivors, often take years to recover from the impacts of fires. Building more resilient, fire adapted communities is an effective way to reduce risks to people, property, and taxpayer dollars. I cannot overstate the importance of focusing on investing in mitigation before a disaster strikes. The most effective tools to build resilience are managed at the community level and include zoning, planning, code adoption and enforcement, risk-based insurance pricing, and development decisions that balance disaster resilience and economic realities.

Developing resilience capacity before an incident can reduce loss of life and economic disruption. When communities are affected, we want to see rebuilding that is safer, smarter, and stronger, but there are significant challenges property owners and communities face in pursuing resilience.

In 2018, Congress passed the Disaster Recovery Reform Act (DRRA) that moved mitigation investments to the front of the disaster cycle, not at the end where it historically lies. Section 1234 of the DRRA authorizes a pre-disaster mitigation program, which will be funded through the Disaster Relief Fund, as a six percent set-aside from estimated disaster grant expenditures and provides states and tribes significant funds to build resilience to help mitigate future disasters.

Additionally, Section 1204 of the DRRA authorizes FEMA to provide HMGP assistance for hazard mitigation measures that substantially reduce the risk of future damage, hardship, loss, or suffering in any area affected by a major disaster, or any area affected by a fire for which assistance was provided under a Section 420 Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG). This section has been

implemented, and FEMA has already begun the process of awarding grants under this new authority.

Section 1205 of the DRRA authorizes FEMA to provide assistance under its HMGP and Pre-Disaster Mitigation program for activities related to wildfire and windstorm disaster mitigation. These activities range from reseeding burned areas with native species, to installing utility poles resilient to extreme winds and fire. FEMA is currently coordinating with fire and building scientists, fire and forest management agencies, research and academic institutions, and wildfire mitigation practitioners at the federal, state, tribal, and local levels to develop a new simplified policy for implementation of this section.

Mitigation is vital, and I thank Congress for giving us these additional tools. The National Institute of Building Sciences' Multi-hazard Mitigation Council (MMC) confirms in their research that mitigation investments made by FEMA realizes significant savings in resources due to reduced future losses. According to research conducted by the MMC over the past year, mitigation programs saved the American public an estimated \$15.5 billion dollars by building new construction beyond code requirements, and \$158 billion in savings from federally funded mitigation grant programs from 1993-2016. FEMA is grateful to Members of this Committee and the rest of Congress for passing the DRRA and providing FEMA, states, tribes, territories, and local communities the ability to invest in mitigation and resilience efforts more aggressively.

Through the Mitigation Framework Leadership Group, FEMA is working with federal, state, local, territorial, tribal, and private sector partners to help align pre- and post-disaster mitigation investments to more effectively reduce disaster losses and increase resilience.

In addition to the new authorities granted under the DRRA, FEMA also manages the HMGP, the Flood Mitigation Assistance grant program, and the Pre-Disaster Mitigation grant program. These programs fund projects such as seismic retrofits, vegetation management and defensible space, safe rooms, and risk reduction for utility and other infrastructure. These funds play a key role in building resilient communities by reducing the risk of future disaster losses. Wildfire mitigation projects can include:

- Defensible space measures: creating perimeters around residential and non-residential buildings and structures through the removal or reduction of flammable vegetation and other combustible material;
- Ignition-resistant construction: applying non-combustible building envelope assemblies, using ignition resistant materials, and using proper retrofit techniques in new and existing structures; and,
- Hazardous fuels reduction: vegetation management to reduce hazardous fuels, vegetation thinning, and the reduction of flammable materials to protect life and property beyond

defensible space perimeters but proximate to at-risk structures.

HMGP is available to a state following a major disaster declaration, if authorized as part of that declaration, and its funding level is based on the costs associated with that disaster. I am mindful of four major challenges related to mitigation projects: time, planning, complexity, and cost-share. It can be challenging for communities to focus on mitigation opportunities immediately following a disaster, when the focus is on response and the immediate recovery. In addition, since there are often several mitigation solutions that could be implemented, these projects can take time to develop and evaluate, and meeting the cost-share requirement takes resources that communities may not have immediately post-disaster.

From the preparedness perspective, FEMA continues to maintain and strengthen the National Preparedness System by helping our non-Federal partners build their capabilities, which will reduce their reliance on the Federal government in the future. Together, we are working to achieve the National Preparedness Goal of a “secure and resilient nation with the capabilities required across the whole community to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to and recover from the threats and hazards that pose the greatest risk.” Our team is currently focused on promoting integrated mutual aid across the whole community, continuing the development of a National Qualification System for first responders, and advancing a National Training and Education System and National Exercise Program to prepare responders and officials for disasters.

I know other states and the country can learn from California’s advanced and tested system of statewide mutual aid. In the past year, FEMA and its U.S. Fire Administration (USFA), in partnership with DHS’s Science & Technology Directorate, convened several learning and sharing sessions, two of which occurred in California, to ensure fire operational leaders are familiar with the latest technologies and methods for fighting wildland fires and to identify gaps where existing technologies would aid in reducing the devastating effects of wildfires to people, homes, businesses, and infrastructure located in fire-prone areas. We are pursuing multiple strategies at each phase of a disaster to reduce the devastating impacts of wildfires in the United States. These strategies also include increased activity in training and education ranging from course development/delivery through the USFA to provide greater emphasis on community risk reduction, community planning, and code development/implementation.

Developing resilient communities ahead of an incident can reduce loss of life and economic disruption. When communities are impacted, they should ensure that they rebuild infrastructure better, tougher, and stronger to protect taxpayer investment and promote economic stability. FEMA is exploring how to incentivize investments in mitigation at the community level, including pre-disaster mitigation, to reduce risk and overall disaster costs.

While we’ll never be able to eliminate risk, we must mitigate risk to every extent possible. FEMA will work with communities and insurers to close the insurance gap across the nation. Building a culture of preparedness will ultimately help people and communities recover faster

following disasters, including wildfires, reducing the overall cost for taxpayers.

### **Next Steps and Conclusion**

At FEMA, we seek constant improvement to support America's disaster survivors, citizens, first responders, and communities. Responding to and recovering from any disaster is a whole community effort that relies on the strength of federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial governments and non-governmental entities and individuals, in addition to FEMA. The unprecedented events of this past fall are no exception.

The 2017 and 2018 wildfire seasons were among the busiest for FEMA. We look forward to collaborating with Congress to implement lessons learned, as well as gather any additional feedback that you may have. I look forward to your questions. Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today.