

STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE

THE

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SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS,  
AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

“Impacts of the 2017 Wildfires in the United States”

Submitted

By

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## **Introduction:**

Good morning, Chairman Barletta, Ranking Member Titus, 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 the importance of planning for wildfires and mitigating their destruction.

In 2017, over 20 million people lived in areas impacted by the wildfires that burned across more than 200,000 acres of state and private land in northern California. This, coupled with last year's historic hurricane season, tested the Nation's ability to respond to and recover from multiple concurrent disasters. Without a doubt, this was FEMA's most demanding year in its 40-year history.

These historic disasters – each historic in its own right – have compelled FEMA to push its limits. Congress entrusts FEMA to coordinate effective and efficient response and recovery missions, to provide oversight of the taxpayers' investment in these activities, and to maintain a highly regarded and well-trained cadre of employees. Today, I will share with you our Agency's experience with wildfire activities and discuss how we can support efforts of states, territories, and tribal nations to plan for and mitigate the fierce destruction of wildfires.

## **2017 Fire Season**

Historically, fire season ran from spring through early fall. However, in recent years, we've seen that is no longer the case. Drought conditions dry fire fuels, which increases the likelihood of wildfires. Rainy conditions encourage growth of fire fuels, increasing the likelihood of wildfires. There is no ideal season that discourages wildfires. Fire season is now all year long, and that taxes the wildland fire system, the agencies that comprise the Nation's emergency management system, and the communities that fires threaten.

Last year in California, where my office is located, the wildfire season was devastating. After a summer of fires along the border with Oregon and in the central part of the state, one night in October, over 100 wildfires broke out in Northern California. During the following days, these fires destroyed thousands of homes, overturned communities, and claimed dozens of lives.

Two months later, this scenario was replicated in Southern California, resulting in two more fatalities. My colleague, Chief Ken Pimlott of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire, has shared the following key elements of the 2017 fire season in California.

- 2012 to 2015 was the driest period in the state in 1,200 years.
- 2016's wet winter produced an excessive grass crop (kindling) but did not change the overall dry conditions of the vegetation in our forests and watersheds.
- 9,133 fires burned 1.2 million acres (well ahead of the 5-year average of 4,835 fires over 202,786 acres).

- The 13-day Santa Ana wind event in December was the longest ever in recorded history.
- 2017 saw the most destructive fire (Tubbs) and the largest fire in terms of acres burned (Thomas) in the state's recorded history.
- Tragically, 2017 was also the deadliest year for wildfires on record in California.

While 2017 has ended, the impacts of the unprecedented fire season will continue for years to come. The increased and enduring flood risks after 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 last year are now working to stabilize burned areas, prevent erosion and mitigate flood risks that follow fires.

### **Resources to Fight Wildfires**

When wildfires occur, the local first responders—county, state, and federal firefighters—lead the firefight. If a wildfire progresses to the point where it threatens such destruction as would 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 is to provide supplemental funding so the firefighters can concentrate on extinguishing fires and not worry about how firefighting resources will be financed. Moreover, the program is designed to prevent major fires from becoming major disasters.

If a wildfire continues out of control after a FMAG has been approved and results in significant needs that cannot be addressed by an FMAG, a governor 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 through the Individual Assistance Program (IA), the Public Assistance Program (PA), and the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). This escalation from FMAG to major disaster declaration occurred in response to the October and December 2017 fires. For the latter, first FEMA approved a series of FMAGs, the President then declared an emergency in order to authorize direct federal assistance to aid firefighting operations, and, subsequently, he declared a major disaster, which ultimately authorized IA, PA, and HMGP.

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

Building more resilient communities is the best 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 critical tools are managed at the community level and involve 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 reduces 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 that property owners and communities face in pursuing resilience.

For that reason, FEMA Administrator Long is calling for a change in the cycle of opportunity: to move mitigation investment to the front of the disaster cycle, not at the end where it typically lies.

The National Institute of Building Sciences' (NIBS) Multi-hazard Mitigation Council (MMC) estimates that for every dollar FEMA invested in mitigation between 1993 and 2016, society as a whole saved six dollars 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, funded from 1993-2016.

Through the Mitigation Framework Leadership Group (MitFLG), 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.

FEMA also manages the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), the Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) grant program, and the Pre-Disaster Mitigation (PDM) grant program; these programs fund projects such as seismic retrofits, 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;
- 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. Each year, we receive more PDM and FMA applications than we are able to fund. From FY 2003-2016, FEMA received PDM grant applications requesting a total of \$3.4 billion. Of the \$3.4 billion, FEMA has awarded and closed \$914 million in mitigation applications with \$31 million remaining pending award. From FY 2013-2016, FEMA received FMA grant applications requesting a total of \$1.2 billion. Of the \$1.2 billion, FEMA has awarded and closed \$53 million in mitigation applications with \$189 million remaining pending award. Wildfire mitigation including defensible space, ignition-resistant construction, and hazardous fuels reduction are eligible projects under HMGP and PDM. To the extent wildfires create flood risk, FMA-funded projects can address that risk.

In the Bipartisan Budget Act, Congress authorized FEMA to provide HMGP funding for FMAGs authorized in fiscal years 2017 and 2018, regardless of whether a major disaster declaration was declared, in areas where FMAG assistance was provided. With 62 FMAGs approved last year, this will deliver millions of dollars in additional mitigation dollars to state, local, tribal, and territorial partners. FEMA is developing guidance to implement this new, time-limited authority. I am hopeful but also mindful of three major challenges related to mitigation projects: time,

complexity, and cost-share. It can sometimes 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.

FEMA, however, is just one part of the team. During a disaster, citizens in the impacted communities also become the “first responders.” We need to build a culture of preparedness, empowering individuals with life skills to help speed the response and recovery efforts.

Do they know how to shut off water and gas? Do they check on their neighbors? Do they know CPR? Are they financially prepared to deal with the impacts of disasters in their communities, including having the right insurance for the disasters they face – be they flood, earthquakes, tornadoes, wildfires, etc.? Do they have some modest level of savings to allow them to miss a few days of work without ending up in financial ruin?

Developing resilient communities ahead of an incident reduces 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 ways to incentivize investments in mitigation that reduce risk, including pre-disaster mitigation, to help reduce disaster costs at all levels.

While we’ll never be able to eliminate risk, we must mitigate risk. 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, and tribal governments and non-governmental entities and individuals, in addition to FEMA. The unprecedented events of this past fall are no exception.

The 2017 wildfire season was one of the busiest for FEMA. We look forward to collaborating with Congress in the coming months 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 Committee today.