



**Are FEMA's Assistance Programs Adequately
Designed to Assist Communities Before, During and
After Wildfire?**

**Statement of
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Good morning, Chair Titus, Ranking Member Webster, and members of the subcommittee. I am Deputy Fire Chief Rich Elliott of the Kittitas Valley (Washington) Fire and Rescue department and chair of the Wildland Fire Policy Committee of the International Association of Fire Chiefs. I appreciate the opportunity today to discuss the assistance programs of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and how they help communities before, during, and after wildland fires.

The IAFC represents the leadership of firefighters and emergency responders worldwide. IAFC members are leading experts in firefighting, emergency medical services, terrorism response, hazardous materials incidents, wildland fire suppression, natural disasters, search and rescue, and public-safety policy. Since 1873, the IAFC has provided a forum for its members to exchange ideas, develop best practices, participate in executive training, and discover diverse products and services available to first responders.

America's fire and emergency services are the only organized group of individuals who are locally situated, staffed, trained, and equipped to respond to all types of emergencies. There are approximately 1.1 million men and women in the fire and emergency service – consisting of approximately 300,000 career firefighters and 800,000 volunteer firefighters – serving in over 30,000 fire departments around the nation. They are trained to respond to all hazards ranging from earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods to acts of terrorism, hazardous materials incidents, technical rescues, fire, and medical emergencies. America's fire and EMS personnel usually are the first on-scene at an incident and the last to leave.

Every state in the nation can face the destruction and loss of a major wildland fire. The year 2020 was one of the worst wildfire years on record. Approximately 59,000 fires burned more than 10.1 million acres. Overall, the cost of wildland fire suppression for the American taxpayer continues

to increase. In 1985, the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Department of Interior spent approximately \$240 million on wildland fire suppression. By 2020, these costs had escalated to approximately \$2.3 billion. These figures leave out state, tribal, territorial, and local firefighting costs and the tragic loss of life and private property caused by wildland fires.

The nation must focus on addressing the wildland fire problem, especially for communities in the wildland-urban interface (WUI). This task will require collaboration between federal, state, tribal, territorial, and local governments along with the private sector and the general public. Because of its support for states and local communities through the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (P.L. 100-707), FEMA is an important partner in the effort to address the wildland fire problem. FEMA specifically can play a major role in mitigating wildland fires, preparing for future fires, responding to these fires, and helping communities to recover from them.

FEMA's Role in Mitigating Wildland Fires

FEMA's mitigation programs can play an important role in helping communities prevent damage from wildland fires. To mitigate their risk, communities must promote building codes to make structures fire resistant; use prescribed burns and other forestry strategies and remove hazardous fuels. FEMA's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program represents a \$1 billion opportunity to mitigate natural hazards, such as wildland fires. The BRIC program funds efforts to adopt building codes and implement mitigation projects that protect community lifelines. BRIC grantees are states, U.S. territories, federally recognized tribal governments and Washington, D.C., but local governments can be subapplicants. The BRIC grants have supported programs to reduce the biomass and hazardous fuels in the WUI and use it for electricity generation. In addition, it has funded projects to support partnerships between local fire

departments and builders to adopt codes and guidelines to use fire-resistant materials in designing roofs, exterior siding, doors, windows, decks, and other housing components. By including a large amount of federal funding with an opportunity for federal, state, local and private partners to work together, the BRIC program represents a major new tool for mitigating the threat of wildland fires. The IAFC thanks the subcommittee for its leadership in creating the BRIC program.

There are challenges to mitigation that need to be addressed. Legislation like the INVEST in America Act (H.R. 3684) and the Build Back Better Act (H.R. 5376) would increase funding for the BRIC program and forest management programs. However, there is a need to ensure that proper planning is done on these projects. With the new focus on mitigation, there is a need for greater technical assistance to address issues like the National Environmental Policy Act review and associated litigation. In addition, the national workforce shortage may create a problem as jurisdictions across the nation all ramp up mitigation projects at the same time.

To address these challenges, the nation must invest in building capacity for mitigation efforts. It is important to educate the public about mitigation practices and standardized practices. Also, the nation must focus on continuing and maintaining projects in the WUI, not just starting them. The IAFC also urges Congress to focus on using collaboration between local fire departments; state and private foresters; federal, state, tribal, territorial, and local elected officials; the private sector and the public to build support for mitigation as a discipline and longstanding effort to prevent wildland fires.

FEMA's Role in Preparedness

FEMA's grant programs help local fire departments prepare for wildland fires. Fire departments face several challenges in preparing to respond to wildland fires. According to the National Fire Protection Association's *Fourth Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service*, 63% of the surveyed fire departments provide wildland firefighting but have not formally trained all of their personnel involved in wildland firefighting.¹ In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has created shortages of fire and EMS personnel and wildland fire training opportunities. This problem especially affects the volunteer fire service, where COVID-19 has restricted recruitment activities and fundraising events. Volunteer fire departments are facing personnel shortages due to COVID-19 because their volunteers may be in at-risk categories, may be concerned about exposing their families to COVID-19, or may be concerned that they will lose their jobs if they become ill. Even career and combination fire departments have been unable to induct new recruit classes into fire academies at the rate they need.

In addition, fire departments are facing challenges with mutual aid and COVID-19. To combat a wildland fire, it is important to get firefighting resources on-scene as quickly as possible. Fire departments rely upon their neighbors and intrastate – and even interstate – resources to combat wildland fires. However, as COVID-19 has infected fire departments, fire personnel are unable to work due to illness or quarantine. This reduces resources available for mutual aid. In addition, some jurisdictions are unable to send resources in response to mutual aid requests because they want to maintain staffing at home in case of COVID-19 surges or they are concerned that their personnel will be exposed to COVID-19 during mutual aid deployments. In addition, the

¹ *Fourth Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service*, National Fire Protection Association, November 2016, p. ix.

wildland fire year and hurricane season can both become more severe at the end of summer and early in the fall, which means that fire capabilities otherwise available for wildland fires may be deployed for hurricane response. Federal wildland firefighters face additional challenges like a pay cap that limits the time that they can spend fighting fires in a year.

FEMA has important programs to help fire departments address these challenges. The Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grants provide peer-reviewed matching grants directly to local fire departments. The AFG grants fund equipment, training, and fire prevention programs which all can be used to prepare for wildland fires. The SAFER grant program includes matching grants to hire career firefighters and also funds recruitment and retention programs for volunteer firefighters. We appreciate Congressional support for the AFG and SAFER program during the pandemic, especially for including \$100 million for the AFG program in the CARES Act (P.L. 116-136), and an additional \$200 million for the SAFER program and \$100 million for the AFG program in American Rescue Plan Act (P.L. 117-2). In addition, the Emergency Management Performance Grants (EMPG) can be used to help communities fund planning for wildland fires, including developing evacuation plans.

The AFG's Fire Prevention and Safety grants also can fund community preparedness programs. Local communities should take steps to mitigate the risk of fires by removing hazardous fuels, promoting protective areas around buildings, using fire-resistant building materials, and planning for evacuations if necessary. The IAFC's Ready, Set, Go! program provides a model program for community preparedness. The program is a partnership with the U.S. Forest Service that promotes wildfire awareness and preparedness in local communities; helps local homeowners protect their homes and prepare for evacuation; and then ensures that the local population can

leave in time when a wildland fire threatens. I ask that FEMA support programs like Ready, Set, Go! in local communities.

FEMA also can take steps to improve mutual aid for local fire departments. One of the greatest challenges that fire departments face is the delayed reimbursement for interstate mutual aid deployments. The reimbursement process can take a long time as the states and FEMA negotiate reimbursement. Then the reimbursement must travel from the state receiving FEMA assistance to the state that sent the fire departments' resources, and then on to the local fire department. In the interim, a local jurisdiction can wait years for reimbursement for hundreds of thousands of dollars in costs from the mutual aid deployment. The reimbursement process must be streamlined and more transparent. The process should be fixed so that fire chiefs and local jurisdictions can track their reimbursement requests through the bureaucracy. In addition, basic costs should be standardized, including the costs of common resources like volunteer firefighters.

In order to help order and track resources, the IAFC developed the National Mutual Aid System (NMAS) as a proposed complement to the national Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC). NMAS will allow a fire chief or state fire agency to identify required firefighting resources within a state or in neighboring states, order them, and then track them as they travel to the scene of the wildland fire. This system will build surge capacity by making it easier to identify and deploy the closest and most appropriate resources to a wildland fire and get assets on-scene in a timely manner. A time-effective response can bring a wildland fire under control faster and reduce casualties and property damage.

The Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) program is an important tool that FEMA has for fighting wildland fires. The FMAG program funds wildland firefighting activities with the purpose of preventing them from becoming major disaster declarations. The FMAGs also

promote coordination between local authorities, state foresters and FEMA regions to control a fire and reduce the damage that it can cause.

While FMAGs are important tools, there are opportunities to improve them. The IAFC supports Representative Joe Neguse's Wildfire Recovery Act (H.R. 1066), which would allow FEMA to set thresholds for raising the federal cost-share for FMAGs. As we have seen recently, wildland fires can destroy small towns in the WUI, which makes it difficult for them to meet a 25% federal cost-share. If the federal government can absorb more of the cost of the FMAG, it will allow those communities to get back on their feet and start providing basic services to their communities.

In addition, we ask that declared FMAGs be designed to cover the footprint of the wildland fire. In 2020, the Evans Canyon Fire burned into fire districts in both Kittitas County and its neighbor, Yakima County. Unfortunately, FEMA determined that the fire damage in only Yakima County warranted an FMAG declaration, which meant that agencies like Kittitas Valley Fire and Rescue were not reimbursed for their expenses. We ask that when an FMAG-declared fire covers more than one jurisdiction, all affected jurisdictions be eligible to apply for reimbursement.

FEMA's Resources for Recovery

After wildland fires strike, FEMA has several programs to help local communities recover. Programs like the Individual Assistance and Public Assistance programs help individual homeowners and local governments survive and rebuild after a disaster. One program that I would like to highlight is FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) Post Fire. This program allows a state or territory to apply for assistance after the first FMAG declaration of the fiscal year and the opportunity closes six months after the close of that fiscal year. This funding

is extremely helpful for communities as they recover from wildland fires. The post-fire grants allow communities to build erosion barriers, re-seed land, and take other steps to prevent flooding after wildland fires. The program also supports reforestation programs so that areas burned by the fire can be rehabilitated to prevent further damage. I thank the committee for creating this program.

I would like to highlight the need for FEMA to provide technical assistance to communities as they navigate the Public Assistance process. A small rural community in the WUI may not have the capability to meet the paperwork requirements for requesting, managing, and reporting on Public Assistance funding. In addition, there needs to be some latitude in some of the Public Assistance requirements. For example, it may not make sense to rebuild a fire station in the exact same location where it was gutted by a wildland fire.

I thank the committee for allowing me to discuss FEMA programs' roles in addressing the nation's wildland fire problem. The threat of wildland fires is growing across the nation and the costs of responding to these fires in dollars, property lost, and casualties is increasing. FEMA is a vital partner in addressing the threat of meeting this challenge. FEMA programs like the BRIC program can be used to mitigate the threat of fires. The AFG, SAFER, and EMPG grants can help communities prepare for wildland fires by developing training and planning and paying for equipment and staffing. The FMAG program is a helpful tool in funding wildland fire response and promoting coordination between federal, state, tribal, territorial, and local partners. Finally, FEMA's recovery programs, like the HMGP Post Fire, can help communities prevent further damage and start to rebuild after a wildland fire. It is important that federal, state, tribal, territorial, and local governments work with the private sector and general public to address this

growing threat. The IAFC looks forward to working with the committee to improve this collaboration.