



**Building a 21st Century Infrastructure
for America: Mitigating Damage and
Recovering Quickly from Disasters**

Statement of

Fire Chief John Sinclair

President and Chairman of the Board

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INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE CHIEFS
4025 FAIR RIDGE DRIVE • FAIRFAX, VA 22033-2868

Good morning, Chairman Barletta, Ranking Member Johnson and members of the subcommittee. I am Chief John Sinclair, fire chief of the Kittitas Valley Fire and Rescue department in Ellensburg, Washington, and president and chairman of the board of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). The IAFC represents approximately 12,000 leaders of the nation's fire, rescue and emergency services. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the importance of mitigating damage and recovering quickly from disasters.

The local fire department is an all-hazards response force that must provide fire suppression; emergency medical response; hazmat response; multicasualty/civil unrest/terrorism response; urban search and rescue; train-derailment response; and technical, high-angle, swift-water building-collapse, confined-space and deep-trench rescue. During times of crisis, the local fire department serves as the closest thing to government that provides service to the victims, their communities, their families and their friends.

The IAFC is concerned by the increasing number of disasters in the United States. For example, the average number of disaster declarations issued from 1960 to 1969 was approximately 19 per year. The number of declarations has escalated to 67 per year from 2010 to 2014 with a record 99 major disaster declarations in 2011.¹

In addition, the intensity and costs of national disasters and emergencies continues to increase. For example, the average annual cost of federal wildland fire-suppression operations from 2009 to 2012 was \$1.25 billion. For the following four years, the average annual cost increased to \$1.84 billion, a 32% increase.²

In addition, the nation still faces a major fire problem. During 2015, more than 1.3 million fires were reported. These fires resulted in more than 3,200 deaths and more than 15,000 civilian fire injuries. They also resulted in \$14.3 billion in property damage.³

The nation must take steps to reduce the costs of fires, national disasters and emergencies. To achieve this goal, we can take common-sense steps to mitigate the risk of disasters, ensure an effective emergency response and even engage in post-disaster mitigation to prevent future disasters.

The Importance of Mitigation

The IAFC supports efforts to mitigate the effects of fires, floods, tornadoes and other windstorms, hurricanes, earthquakes, acts of terrorism, and other natural and human-made disasters. Communities can take physical actions to protect themselves and develop plans and educational programs to help citizens prepare themselves from the threat of disasters.

The IAFC recommends that states and communities adopt model residential and commercial building and fire codes as a way to mitigate the risk of disasters. These codes are developed

¹ Bruce R. Lindsay and Francis X. McCarthy, "Stafford Act Declarations 1953-2014: Trends, Analyses, and Implications for Congress," Congressional Research Service, July 14, 2015, p.11.

² https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/fireInfo_documents/SuppCosts.pdf.

³ <http://www.nfpa.org/news-and-research/fire-statistics-and-reports/fire-statistics>

using a consensus-driven process in which fire protection officials, engineers, architects, construction experts and all other interested parties discuss how to develop safer structures. These codes provide basic requirements for the design and construction of a building as well as the necessary fire protection. The fire and emergency service also participates in the development of these codes to ensure that the buildings are safe for both the public and first responders.

The adoption of current building and fire codes has been proven to prevent the tragic loss caused by extreme weather and natural disasters. For example, the World Bank reported that the “1988 earthquake in Armenia had half the energy release of the 1989 earthquake in Loma Prieta near San Francisco, California, and yet caused 25,000 deaths compared to 100 in San Francisco.”⁴

In 2003, similarly powerful earthquakes occurred in Bam, Iran and Paso Robles, California. The earthquake in California killed two people, while the one in Iran killed 41,000. The World Bank reported that the “strict adherence to tough zoning and building codes” in California was responsible for the lives saved.⁵

In addition, the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety (IBHS) found that the adoption of high-wind provisions in residential buildings reduced damage to houses in Florida. After Hurricane Charley in 2004, the claim frequency for houses built after 1996 (when Charlotte County, Florida, enacted high-wind standards) was reduced by 60 percent and the claims were 42 percent less severe when a loss occurred.⁶ Because of this evidence, the IAFC recommends that Congress take steps to encourage states to adopt model building codes.

Communities also can take steps to reduce the risks caused by natural and human-made disasters and emergencies. With the assistance of the U.S. Forest Service, the IAFC runs the “Ready, Set, Go!” (RSG) Program. Using RSG resources, local fire departments help residents develop mitigation plans (Ready), teach them to be situationally aware (Set) and to act early, following their Personal Wildland Fire Action Plans should there be a need to evacuate (Go). There currently are 1,729 RSG members nationwide, including 20 in Pennsylvania, 41 in Georgia and 57 in Oregon.

It is important to recognize that mitigation planning can be adapted for all-hazards. For example, the Barnegat Volunteer Fire Department near the New Jersey Pine Barrens was a long-time RSG member. The fire department spent more than 2,000 hours educating its communities in how to create defensible space, maintain situational awareness and develop evacuation plans in the case of wildland fires. When Hurricane Sandy struck in 2012, the fire department worked with the police department and used its RSG planning to successfully evacuate the community.

In addition, the nation must invest in its infrastructure to protect communities from disasters. On August 1, 2007, the I-35W Mississippi River Bridge collapsed in Minneapolis, killing 13 people and injuring 145. The nation also has witnessed fires that damaged the Oakland-San Francisco

⁴ Charles Kenny, *Why Do People Die in Earthquakes? The Costs, Benefits and Institutions of Disaster Risk Reduction in Developing Countries*, The World Bank, January 2009, pp. 2-3.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Hurricane Charley: Natural Force vs. Structural Strength,” Institute for Business and Home Safety, 2012, p. 5.

Bay Bridge in California in 2007 and the I-85 bridge in Atlanta, Georgia, in March. These fires snarled transportation systems and required a fire service response. It is important that infrastructure be strengthened and transportation systems be made resilient, especially to mitigate the risk of major disasters or emergencies.

Ensuring an Effective Emergency Response

An effective emergency response is key to reducing the damage from a disaster or emergency and ensuring an effective recovery. For example, the sooner a wildland fire is extinguished, the less damage it can do. Federal, state, tribal/territorial and local partners all have important roles to play in an effective response.

Experienced leadership is critical to an effective response. The IAFC would like to see experienced leaders with fire and emergency service leadership and emergency-management experience appointed to leadership positions at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA). The last two FEMA administrators, R. David Paulison and W. Craig Fugate, transformed the agency based on their experience at the local and state levels. The Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act (P.L. 109-295) set specific requirements for the FEMA Administrator, including a “demonstrated ability in and knowledge of emergency management and homeland security” and at least five years of management experience. The IAFC recommends that that FEMA Administrator, the Deputy Administrator, the Assistant Administrators and the U.S. Fire Administrator all meet these criteria. In addition, the FEMA leadership should understand the roles of state and local partners during national emergencies.

At the local level, it is also important to have experienced leadership. The USFA’s National Fire Academy (NFA) provides education for the next generation of fire service leaders. During my career, I have seen the fire service evolve from extinguishing fires to becoming responsible for all-hazards response. The NFA has trained more than 1.4 million students since 1975. It includes both in-person and electronic courses to help fire service leaders adapt to the new missions that they face. It is important that Congress pass legislation to reauthorize funding for the USFA and NFA to ensure that the NFA remains the nation’s premier fire and EMS educational institution.

An adequately trained, staffed and equipped local fire department is a key component of an effective response. Local fire departments usually are the first to arrive on scene at a major disaster or emergency and the last to leave. In addition, local fire departments play a key role in the National Preparedness System, where Fire Management and Suppression has been identified as a core capability of the National Preparedness Goal. When local communities require interstate or intrastate aid, they rely on local fire departments across the nation to provide aid through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), state mutual-aid plans or local mutual-aid plans. If local fire departments do not have adequate staffing and assistance, the National Preparedness System breaks down.

As the National Fire Protection Association’s (NFPA) *Fourth Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service* demonstrates, there are serious deficiencies in the preparedness of the nation’s fire and emergency service:

- Sixty percent of all fire departments (that answered the NFPA survey) respond to hazmat incidents, but have not formally trained their personnel to handle them.⁷
- Fifty-three percent of all departments cannot equip all firefighters on a shift with self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA).⁸
- Almost three-quarters (72%) of departments reported that some of their personal protective clothing was at least 10 years old, which exceeds the life-cycle of the equipment.⁹
- Fifty percent of all departments do not have enough portable radios to equip all emergency responders on a shift.¹⁰

The Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG; also, known as the FIRE) program and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) program provide matching grants to help local fire departments meet their basic needs and improve their capabilities to respond to all hazards. For example, my department received AFG funding in 2006 and 2007 to purchase personal protective equipment and SCBAs. We used these grants to replace 20-year-old turnout gear, which had exceeded its 10-year service life. In addition, the purchase of new SCBAs allowed us to replace an old system with the current, contemporary gear that neighboring departments had. The equipment helped us regionalize our local fire and emergency service and improve our interoperability.

The AFG and SAFER Grant programs are authorized through the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 2017. The IAFC requests that Congress pass legislation this year to reauthorize funding for these programs. In addition, we are concerned about the sunset provision in each program's authorizing statute, which would eliminate the programs in early January. We ask Congress to remove this sunset date to ensure that the programs can continue to support America's fire and EMS departments.

The State Homeland Security Grant Program (SHSGP) and the Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI) primarily are aimed at terrorism response, but also support all-hazards preparedness. The programs use federal funds as an incentive for fire, EMS, law-enforcement, public-health, and other federal, state, tribal/territorial and local agencies to plan and exercise together. Whether an act of terrorism, a hurricane or a major wildland fire, it is important for the key decision makers to have planned, trained and exercised together before the event. Because of the beneficial role that these programs play in all-hazards response, we are concerned by potential cuts to these programs in FY 2018.

In addition, the IAFC recommends that Congress continue to fund the Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) System. The USAR teams are located across the nation and possess critical skills in responding to both natural disasters and acts of terrorism. These specialized teams have received

⁷ "Fourth Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service: Conducted 2015 and Including Comparisons to the 2001, 2005, and 2010 Needs Assessment Surveys", National Fire Protection Association, November 2016, p. viii.

⁸ "Fourth Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service: Conducted 2015 and Including Comparisons to the 2001, 2005, and 2010 Needs Assessment Surveys", National Fire Protection Association, November 2016, p. xii.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

international acclaim for the lifesaving aid that they provide to desperate communities. We thank the committee for passing legislation last year to provide necessary legal authorization for these teams.

It also is important that fire and EMS departments are reimbursed in a timely manner after interstate mutual-aid deployments. When a state requests fire and rescue response through the EMAC, local communities send their firefighters and apparatus to respond. These costs are borne by the communities until they are reimbursed. If a community must wait years for reimbursement through the complicated federal/state process, local leaders will face fiscal challenges requiring them to stretch budgets, raise taxes or take on debt until the community finally is reimbursed. The IAFC recommends that Congress direct FEMA to review the reimbursement process for mutual-aid deployments to ensure that local communities are reimbursed in a timely manner.

The IAFC also recommends that FEMA work with the states to ensure that they have strong mutual-aid systems. Every day, local communities use mutual-aid agreements between neighboring communities to provide emergency response at incidents, including large fires, traffic accidents and hazmat spills. Statewide systems can help to provide resources effectively as the states request and provide aid through interstate compacts of the EMAC system. Having a strong mutual-aid system in place is not only cost-effective; it is also essential to the preservation of life and property.

Training also is a vital component to an effective response system. The increasing transportation of alternative fuels, Bakken crude oil and other hazardous materials is a serious issue. The IAFC supports efforts to improve training to meet these risks. For example, Congress created the Assistance for Local Emergency Response Training grant program in FY 2015 and FY 2016 to support web-based and in-person training for local fire departments (especially rural and volunteer departments) that must be prepared for rail-based hazmat incidents. As the president and Congress consider legislation to improve the nation's infrastructure, the IAFC asks that you also consider funding for training to help fire and EMS departments prepare to respond the various risks that travel along our nation's highways, rails, waterways and airways every day.

Authorizing Critical Post-Disaster Mitigation

Communities can use the recovery period to mitigate the risks of future disasters. For example, after a wildland fire, a community may still suffer from landslides or floods, due to the heavily burned land and lack of vegetation. In addition, the threat of future fires remains if adequate mitigation is not performed.

The IAFC continues to support legislation to mitigate these risks after wildland fires. We supported language in last year's FEMA Disaster Assistance Reform Act (H.R. 1471), which would allow states that receive Fire Management Assistance Grants also to receive hazard mitigation funding. FEMA-funded projects, such as the establishment of erosion barriers and reseeded burned land, will help communities recover more quickly from wildland fires and prevent future disasters. This legislation has been reintroduced as the standalone Wildfire

Prevention Act (H.R. 1183). The IAFC asks the subcommittee to consider and pass this bipartisan legislation.

Conclusion

I thank you for the opportunity today to testify about the importance of mitigating damage and recovering quickly from disasters. It is important to recognize that predisaster mitigation activities, preparedness planning and an effective response play major roles in achieving this goal.

Effective, physical mitigation efforts, including the adoption of model building codes, will create structures that are strong enough to protect the public from all-hazards. Community preparedness planning, including education and efforts by individual families, can help protect the whole community and streamline necessary public-evacuation efforts. In addition, effective post-disaster mitigation efforts can help a community prepare for the next disaster. Federal programs and grants can provide necessary resources to assist in these efforts.

An effective response also will reduce casualties and property damage and speed recovery. An effective response requires experienced leadership. In addition, it requires an effective national-preparedness system with well-trained, -staffed and -equipped local assets. The federal government supports the national response system through policies, grants and training that have improved our ability to respond to all hazards.

As the new Administration and the new Congress examine how to reduce the damage and cost of disasters, it is important to remember Ben Franklin's axiom that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Learning from the tragedies of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, the federal government has made strategic investments to improve the nation's ability to prepare for and respond to all hazards. We recommend that Congress continue to support these efforts to keep America safe.