

**Committee on Government Reform Subcommittee on Energy Policy, Natural Resources  
and Regulatory Affairs**

*Testimony of Bruce Turbeville, Chairman, California Fire Safe Council  
May 5, 2004*

Chairman Ose and esteemed members, on behalf of the California Fire Safe Council (FSC) and the 120-plus community Fire Safe Councils in California, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I would like to provide background information on the California Fire Safe Council to communicate the perspective from which I will make my remarks.

The California Fire Safe Council is a nonprofit organization. Our mission is to preserve and enhance California's manmade and natural resources by providing leadership and support that mobilizes all Californians to protect their homes, communities and environment from wildfires. Our storefront, if you will, is [www.firesafecouncil.org](http://www.firesafecouncil.org).

I founded the Council in 1993 as part of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection's (CDF) statewide fire prevention public education program. As education officer for California, my annual budget was \$250,000, or less than one penny per citizen.

It was critical then, as it is now, that other entities with the potential to be negatively affected by wildfires play a role in educating Californians about the role they need to play in improving their homes', neighborhoods' and communities' chances of surviving a wildfire. We actively involve private businesses, associations, environmental groups, timber industry, utilities, government and others in educating Californians. By using the combined resources and delivery channels of our members, we educate citizens about their fire safety responsibility.

Early education efforts laid the groundwork for citizen input into CDF's fire plan, where each unit had to identify the community assets at risk within its jurisdiction, develop strategies to protect those assets and elicit community input on and support of prioritizing the protection of those assets. This citizen input led to formation of local Fire Safe Councils.

Many Councils formed at the local level to increase cooperation across political boundaries from the citizen-driven perspective. Concurrently, the California Fire Alliance formed to increase inter-agency cooperation from the top-down.

The California Fire Alliance is composed of the federal, state and local fire and land management agencies, plus the FSC. The Alliance works to eliminate bureaucratic barriers that hinder what it calls pre-fire suppression activities in California. The Alliance's member organization directors meet twice each year to provide direction to staff and consider issues raised by staff. Member organizations' staffers meet monthly to accomplish the work of the Alliance. The Alliance has received NFP funding, but it primarily relies on the cooperative efforts of its members to accomplish its objectives within existing organizational budgets and staff responsibilities.

The early efforts of both the FSC and local Councils were almost solely powered by dedicated volunteerism and collaboration. Although many receive National Fire Plan (NFP) grants, volunteers are still the life-blood. The Councils are very effective at creating consensus among interests that historically disagree. In addition, the Councils are adept at coalescing citizen support for fire safety programs because the Councils are largely citizen-directed and, therefore, meet the citizens' needs.

Our traditional focus has been on educational programs. However, the NFP shifted the emphasis of the Councils by providing funding as has never been available before to address additional fire safety problems in our communities.

The NFP shifted the slow growth of Councils into high gear as paid staffers were hired and new Councils formed. To facilitate this NFP-grant-funded growth, many Councils incorporated as nonprofits. There are now more than 120 community Fire Safe Councils in California.

The Councils are undertaking a number of types of projects using their primary, and in most cases only, source of funding, NFP funds through the U.S. Department of Interior (DOI) agencies and USDA Forest Service (FS). One of the most popular projects is community chipper programs where homeowners cut their brush and stack it curbside where the Councils chip it and return it to the same spot for use as mulch in the yard. Other popular projects are education programs that are integral to gaining and maintaining broad community support for fuel reduction activities on federal and non-federal lands. Community wildfire safety planning also has been widely undertaken.

While our projects are quite successful, we face many more challenges that have put almost all Councils at a crossroads where organizational survival is at stake. I would like to talk about challenges and successes today.

The FSC appreciates the Bush Administration's wildland fire regulations that help enable the implementation of strategies to reduce the effects of wildfire. The NFP, which includes elements begun under the previous administration, calls for, and funds, collaboration for projects on non-federal lands. The Bush Administration's Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) can potentially simplify the environmental compliance process. The President's Management Agenda encourages smarter program delivery. We hope initial gains will become long-term successes in the areas of prevention education and hazard mitigation.

We are cautious of over-regulating, but believe strides can be made to ensure regulations, whether federal, state or local are made to be common, fair and understandable. They must also be acceptable by the public and enforceable. The public must be educated about why the regulations exist. The FSCs use peer-to-peer strategies to educate communities about fire regulations and in so doing, we have motivated citizens to become compliant. Our experience shows that when people clearly see the benefit of fire safety regulations, they support and comply with them. The key to successful regulations is education and motivation. Another important component is to have regulations better address the retrofit issue where we are trying to bring homes built prior to many fire safety regulations up to current standards.

The National Academy of Public Administration's (NAPA) January 2004 report, "Containing Wildland Fire Costs: Enhancing Hazard Mitigation Capacity" noted that, "the opportunities for big savings are in reducing wildfire hazards on a broad scale before a fire begins."

NAPA concentrated on three hazard and cost reduction strategies: 1) Create fire-resistant communities; 2) Create strategic fuel break systems; and 3) Reduce heavy vegetative fuel loads and restore forests to healthy levels that permit successful initial attack.<sup>1</sup>

From the FSC perspective, implementing these strategies requires collaborative planning and compliance, a strong educational component and funding.

- Collaborative Planning

The HFRA called for creation of community wildfire protection plans because collaborative planning is critical to identifying the highest risks and prioritizing treatments to cost-effectively use the limited funding available.

Many communities in California have done collaborative community fire protection plans. The California Fire Alliance works informally to make sure there is no duplication in plans. Our concern at this time is confirming the existing plans fit with the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, the National Fire Plan and Disaster Mitigation Act 2000, implemented through the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES).

Planning is linked to funding in California. Grant applications for NFP funds require that the problem or project that addresses the problem be cited in a community fire plan to be considered for funding. The judging criteria for these grant programs cite the second ranking criteria as whether the project will create or is linked to a fire plan.

The FSC operates an online NFP grants clearinghouse funded by members of the California Fire Alliance. We recently selected projects for 2004 FS funding and 2005 select DOI agencies funding. Of the 98 projects chosen for funding, only two were to create fire plans. Only two were selected, not because there were that few applications for planning, but because priority went to projects that met the top ranking criteria, which was removing fuel.

From our perspective, we support the HFRA's call for collaborative planning, but no longer have adequate funding to do it. California has significant unmet capacity. The call for concept papers for 2004-2005 NFP grant funds in our state yielded 393 concept papers requesting \$49 million for fuels reduction, planning and education projects ready to be implemented, and scheduled to last 1-2 years.

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<sup>1</sup> *Containing Wildland Fire Costs: Enhancing Hazard Mitigation Capacity*, a report by a panel of the National Academy of Public Administration for the U.S. Congress and the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, January, 2004, p. 3-4.

Another challenge to collaborative planning that could hinder the HRFA's effectiveness is lack of cooperation. For a plan to be truly collaborative, it should cross political boundaries, and publicly identify all priorities and projects. This type of plan is difficult to put together due to agency fear of loss of control over its own resources.

- Environmental Compliance

The Administration's efforts to streamline the NEPA process on public lands reeks of common sense. The FSC's focus is on non-federal lands and communities-at-risk so I cannot comment on the effectiveness of these regulations as they have more significant impact within agencies at this time.

In California, this year's Community Protection grants from the FS to local communities will be the first round of grants to be affected by the changing process from the FSC's perspective.

We support practical solutions on environmental compliance. Since NFP funding became available in 2001, the compliance process has confused, angered and alienated many organizations. The California Fire Alliance's member agencies took quick steps to remedy the situation while still working under then-existing limitations. Other agencies are using this streamlined, yet effective, process through the grants clearinghouse.

The first step, taken by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), was to turn project funding decisions over to the FSC. By not making a decision, BLM does not trip NEPA. Instead, BLM reviews projects for compliance with Endangered Species Act, National Historic Preservation Act and Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Projects are still subject to NEPA's California counterpart, the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), as well as the California Endangered Species Act (CESA), among others.

The California Fire Alliance then formed an environmental compliance working group. The group recently completed a guide of federal compliance policies and contact list within each agency to help grant recipients, many of them citizen-driven groups, to navigate the maze of compliance regulations. The group is currently working on a guide for state compliance, using a resource from OES. This information is posted on the Alliance's web site, [www.cafirealliance.org](http://www.cafirealliance.org).

In addition to streamlining processes, there must be public education that makes the processes easy to understand and navigate. All the organizations we know with NFP funding want to do the right thing, but need simple, step-by-step directions that explain how and why.

- Education

While education plays a critical role in creating the political will from the bottom-up to carry out fire safety projects, education has suffered significantly due to reduced funding. Under the Bush Administration, National Fire Plan grant programs have funded valuable education programs like Firewise nationally and the programs of the FSC in California. We understand Firewise funding

is being reduced. And we know that funding under NFP has been reduced in California. For example, the Bureau of Land Management's Community Assistance program fell from \$3.6 million each year in 2001-2003 to \$1.5 million in 2004. We are uncertain if there will be Community Assistance funding in the 2005 budget. We are seeing these decreases, yet understand that the National Fire Plan funding overall is stable. We are left to assume that work on non-federal lands, particularly education programs, is a decreasing priority.

- Funding

As funding is shrinking, the demand for funding is growing. The online grants clearinghouse at [www.grants.firesafecouncil.org](http://www.grants.firesafecouncil.org) received requests for \$49 million in grant funds for 2004-2005, topping the previous three years' annual average of approximately \$24 million.

The key points I'd like to make about funding are:

- 1) It must be stable if we have any chance of addressing the significant wildfire problem. Councils that logged great successes are going out of business because we do not have reliable funding. An example of lack of reliability is that these programs are tapped to pay for excess suppression costs.
- 2) It must increase. This is a \$49 million-per-year problem in California alone. In the short-term, grant funding equal to the problem is vital. In the long-term, market forces need to provide an economic foundation for the process.
- 3) It must be simplified.
  - a) While the money seems to come in one appropriation with flexibility, it attracts strings like lint as it moves through the agencies so that by the time it reaches the local level it is difficult to meet the requirements.
    - i) One point of difficulty, particularly for organizations like Fire Safe Councils, is cost sharing/matching funds. Each agency seems to impose different matching requirements. While we're committed to producing a collaborative effort, having to meet seemingly arbitrary, externally imposed targets and undertake the associated administrative burden of tracking the match adds unnecessary complexity to projects. The only reason we can think as to why there are matching fund requirements is to encourage collaboration to extend the value of the projects. Instead, we believe extending the value of projects should be influenced by whether that project is prioritized in a collaboratively developed community fire plan as called for in the HFRA. If it is, the matching funds will be there, but in a way that makes sense to the project, from 0-100-plus percent, as determined by the project.
    - ii) Tracking matching funds is one of myriad administrative requirements that come with any federal grant. Effective project design and grant management hinges upon having a knowledgeable staff. Yet we see the Federal agencies are reluctant to fund community action group coordinators, instead expressing the desire to focus on treating acres. Just as agencies need staff to be effective, so do we, and we need the funding to do it.
  - b) The federal agencies are funding projects on different fiscal year schedules in California. The FS is funding using 2004 funding while the DOI agencies are selecting projects for

2005 funding. Combined with the time it takes to receive payment after a grant is awarded, we frequently miss our project windows. We would like to see better collaboration by the agencies to develop a single approach.

In general, collaboration is an area where the California Fire Alliance and Fire Safe Councils have been successful, yet there is still room for improvement. The Alliance has led by example in showing agency cooperation among federal, state and local government. The Fire Safe Councils have worked to provide a non-partisan forum that welcomes the diverse opinions and participation of a variety of stakeholders. We often have to agree to disagree on issues, but usually agree that something needs to be done to solve the wildfire problem and that we will work together on the solution.

The administration's actions in this area are helping in California. For example in the spirit of cooperation and keeping with the President's Management Agenda, California Fire Alliance member organizations worked together to develop the online grants clearinghouse for NFP funds. The agencies agreed to one deadline and a simplified application. The FSC was instrumental in designing, and currently staffs, the clearinghouse at [www.grants.firesafecouncil.org](http://www.grants.firesafecouncil.org), which demonstrates the agencies' ability not only to work collaboratively among themselves, but with a non-governmental entity.

The clearinghouse successfully routed applications for consideration under multiple grant programs and created a way for organizations without grantwriting expertise, but with great desire to improve their communities, to be selected for funding. The clearinghouse is a grant application, reporting and close-out site. We're currently developing capabilities to produce customized reports that pull data from applications, quarterly reports and concept papers. In addition, the clearinghouse will include a searchable library of model projects. These model projects will help cost-effective use of funds by potentially seeding a project in other areas interested in a similar approach. It supports the FSC's existing informal information-sharing network and makes information available to a wider audience.

The clearinghouse is flexible. Although designed in California, it can potentially be adapted by other states. Although designed for NFP grant programs, it can potentially be adapted for other grant programs, such as the Community and Private Lands Fire Assistance and FEMA pre-disaster mitigation. A key barrier to this will be concern that it could concentrate power in the hands of the FSC, a non-governmental organization, or the California Fire Alliance, where multiple agencies could vie for "the power." I say that facetiously because the administration of the clearinghouse is facilitative in nature. Regarding the FSC, we are a pass-through entity for some grants, and the responsibility for the associated administrative burden certainly is "right powerful," but is not power.

Our role as facilitator of the clearinghouse gives us both the top-down and bottom-up perspective on cooperation. By working at a statewide level to fund local projects, we gain a greater understanding of the collaborative process and the agencies' varying approaches.

We see from the top-down the California Fire Alliance member agencies call for collaboration at all levels of their agencies. We see from the bottom-up, different levels of cooperation and leadership by agencies and within individual agencies. The Councils would benefit from consistent participation and leadership of the agencies in the Councils. The Councils would further benefit from the agencies committing resources, particularly mapping and planning resources, to assist FSCs in moving forward on projects that benefit communities-at-risk.

The news coverage of last year's Southern California fires gave us an intimate look at the effects fires can have on communities-at-risk. At the height of the siege, we saw a whole community destroyed. In the aftermath, we are coming to grips with the personal losses suffered by so many. Friends and family dead. Homes gone. Jobs lost. Natural resources damaged. We're also seeing finger pointing, accusations being hurled and responsibility being shifted – the calisthenics of blame.

But fire has another effect. It is the antidote to the syndrome of, "it won't happen to me." I have been in the fire service or with the California Fire Safe Council for 40 years. Since I can remember, we have been telling people to clear their defensible space because it can help save their homes in a fire. Yet so many people do not do it until they are convinced by a near miss or by losing their home that they should be clearing their defensible space. Fire provides the ultimate educational moment to those directly affected, and others whose heightened awareness gives us the chance to reach them with our educational message that potentially will make a life and death difference in their lives.

There are three things communities can do to protect themselves in the future, which I'm paraphrasing from the January 2004 NAPA report:

- 1) Make the community fire safe. In many areas, the Fire Safe Councils are creating fire safe communities one house at a time. We're going door-to-door to educate people about the need to become fire safe. We provide them with a fire safe assessment of their house and property, and have programs that help them clear their defensible space.
  - a) Being fire safe means having a defensible space. In California, we define that as clearing flammable vegetation a minimum of 30 feet from the home. That does not mean a ring of bare dirt around the house. Homes with defensible space can have beautiful yards where fire resistant plants are strategically placed to sap a fire of its strength as it approaches the home. CDF did a study of home survivability after the 1990 Paint Fire in Santa Barbara. The agency found that homes with a minimum of 30 feet of brush clearance had a 78 percent survivability rate.
  - b) Being fire safe also means maintaining the home itself to fire safe standards, such as cleaning leaves and other plant debris out of gutters and off roofs. We emphasize that the roof not only be kept clean, but that it needs to be constructed of fire resistant roofing material. The study of the Paint Fire showed that buildings with non-flammable roofs, such as concrete shingles, had a 70 percent survivability rate.

The Santa Barbara study also showed that homes with both defensible space and non-combustible roofs had an 86 percent survivability rate.<sup>2</sup>

- 2) Create strategic fuel break systems near communities. While we are working on individual lots within communities, Fire Safe Councils also are creating fuel breaks near communities that will limit a fire's ability to spread into the community. Through a grant from the Bureau of Land Management, the Butte County Fire Safe Council funded creation of a shaded fuel break near a subdivision in Paradise that will protect homes and a key evacuation route from potential future wildfires.

These fuel breaks also help slow a fire and give the first firefighters on the scene a better chance of controlling it in their initial attack. Controlling fire within a small acreage during initial attack is a key success measurement for firefighters. We want them to be successful.

- 3) Reduce heavy fuel loads and restore ecosystem health, which will permit successful initial attack. We are working to unclog ecosystems that are backed up with too much vegetation. For example, The California Fire Safe Council provided U.S. Fish & Wildlife grant funding for fuel reduction in the Berkeley area affected by the 1991 Tunnel Fire that will remove a build-up of invasive weeds and eucalyptus trees, and have a dual benefit of potentially providing improved habitat to the threatened Alameda Whipsnake, which lives in fire-dependent chaparral.

But we could be doing better. We support the National Association of Public Administration's recommendations made in its January 2004 report. Better technical support for planning, collaborative planning, additional funding, simplified funding processes, funding for long-term maintenance and better success measurement capability will enable more cost-effective, long-term solutions.

Currently, the federal agencies that fund our activities ask us to target treatment of acres as the highest priority. Through the grants clearinghouse, we estimate that 2004-2005 federal funding will be used to treat approximately 14,000 acres, primarily in condition class 3. We have the capacity to do more. We left approximately 24,000 acres on the table in the form of unfunded projects for 2004-2005.

The Southern California fires burned 793,597 acres in two weeks. It makes our efforts to clear 14,000 acres in the next two years look insignificant. Nothing could be further from the truth. Fire Safe Councils and others logged small triumphs amid the ashes of that great tragedy that are models for other communities to follow. To mark the one-year anniversary of the fires, the California Fire Safe Council will host a commemorative event Nov. 14-15 in the San Diego area.

The Lytle Creek Fire Safe Council is a group of volunteers that helps do defensible space clearance on roadsides and in yards in this small mountain community of approximately 350

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<sup>2</sup> *California's I-Zone, Urban Wildland Fire Prevention & Mitigation*, edited by Rodney Slaughter, January, 1996, p. 116-120.

homes. It was one of the first communities threatened by the Grand Prix Fire. Lytle Creek Fire Safe Council President Ellen Pollema told me that when a battalion chief's professional judgment told him to pull out his firefighters for their safety, he met unexpected opposition.

She reported that a U. S. Forest Service firefighter objected, saying, "This community started a Fire Safe Council three years ago. We promised that if they did their part, we'd do ours."

Surveying the community's work in creating defensible space around homes and brush clearance along roads, the battalion chief relented and ordered his men back in. The firefighters bravely faced the fire in this neighborhood. Of approximately 350 homes, only 18 were lost.

The Mt. Rim Fire Safe Council has been effectively educating residents of the San Bernardino Mountains about wildfire risk since its inception in the late 1990s. Laura Dyberg, president of the Mountain Rim Fire Safe Council, said her Council helped create an evacuation plan before the fires and the community practiced evacuating. The planning paid off. Many residents were already prepared and approximately 80,000 people evacuated the mountain communities in record time.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service had recently completed a strategic fuel break system that gave firefighters the help they needed on the Otoy Fire. Although the fire burned 50,000 acres, the fuel break system gave firefighters the ability to keep it from growing larger.

The Stevenson Ranch development has been hailed as a model of successful planning and fire safe construction. Every home survived the Simi Fire that burned within hundreds of feet of the subdivision. The streets in Stevenson Ranch are wide. The roofs are constructed of fire-retardant roofing materials. The homes have dual-glazed windows and sealed eaves. The landscape is well-watered and defensible space clearance extends to the hillsides surrounding this development of approximately 3,500 homes in Northern Los Angeles County.

A newspaper article quoted a firefighter as saying, "With the construction here, you couldn't burn down these houses with a blowtorch if you tried," said Dave Doughty, a Tehama County carpenter and volunteer firefighter whose engine was assigned to a Stevenson Ranch road that clings to a scorched hillside. "One fire engine could have saved this entire development."<sup>3</sup>

These examples are evidence that when effective preventative measures are taken, damage from wildfires is significantly reduced. Historically, people look to government to solve the problem. In this regard, the Fire Safe Councils are a powerful ally to agencies because we give them what they want – citizens who take responsibility to help themselves.

As a society we are at a turning point where we must acknowledge that we will likely never have the resources it would take to fight these fires and have 100 percent initial attack success. Our reliance on suppression as savior is unrealistic. There will be losses. Therefore, we must shift from the mindset of an adversarial relationship with fire and learn to live with fire. This means

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<sup>3</sup> "Fire-resistant Subdivision Thanks its Foresight," Contra Costa Times, Nov. 2, 2003; article by New York Times Reporter Dean E. Murphy.

acknowledging that we cannot conquer it. Instead, we must work to minimize the impact it has on life, property and natural resources; and speed the recovery of those three when fire happens.

I have been a firefighter and a fire preventer. I speak from 40 years' experience when I say that buying more fire engines and water-dropping helicopters will not solve our problem. That is why I am grateful for the administration and bipartisan efforts to make both prevention and suppression successful.

I'm known for saying two things, with which I will end my testimony:

- 1) For every dime spent on prevention, we save a dollar in suppression. The Southern California fires cost approximately \$123 million in suppression. Imagine the amount of prevention we could have accomplished. That's all I can do because the zeros on my calculator will not go that high.
- 2) The cost of fighting fires will get covered; it always does, which leads to a question: Why is there always enough money to fight a fire, but never enough money to prevent it?

Thank you.