

Written Testimony to the House Committee on Government Reform Subcommittee on Energy Policy, Natural Resources, and Regulatory Affairs

Good afternoon, Chairman Ose and committee members. My name is Bill McCammon, and I am the Fire Chief of the Alameda County Fire Department in California. I am also the President of the California Fire Chiefs Association, and Board member of the Metropolitan Fire Chiefs Association. It is a great pleasure for me to provide for your consideration information about the challenges fire service professionals and communities face in mitigating, managing and responding to wildland fires.

In 2002 we saw 7 million acres burn throughout the Western United States, with lives lost, unprecedented property destruction, and a price tag exceeding 5 billion dollars. In 2003 during one 20-day period in Southern California, fires consumed 740,000 acres, with 3,600 residential structures, 36 commercial properties, 1,169 out buildings destroyed, and 22 fatalities, including one firefighter. In the past decade California alone has experienced a 10 billion dollar cost for fire suppression and economic loss due to wild fires.

If there is one lesson we have learned about the devastating effects of the most recent fires, it is that we all lose in the end. In the recent Southern California fires, there were critically sensitive habitat areas where fuels management programs were forbidden prior to the fires; that habitat is now destroyed. There were property owners that didn't manage the vegetation adjacent to their homes; those homes are no longer standing. There were lives lost and critical watershed destroyed after the fires as heavy rains caused mudslides in the recently burnt areas. The long-term effects to the entire ecosystem will have a significant human and economic cost to the communities that were burnt out. Unless we make significant changes to our approach to managing fuels, along with the encroachment of development into these areas, we are setting ourselves up for more devastating fire sieges.

History shows us that fire has been a common phenomenon in the forests of this country. Periodic lightning fires burnt the forest floor, but never found their way into the upper canopy. These fires managed the density and health of the forest. Today through established environmental and forestry management practices, including fire suppression efforts, the density of our forests have increased exponentially making any fire that occurs in the forest a larger more devastating event. The complexity of fire suppression and the social cost of these large fires also increase exponentially as civilization moves into the forests. We continue to see development encroaching into the forests, with minimal emphasis placed on fire safety.

We know how to minimize the impacts of these devastating fires. It has been shown time and time again, that in areas where there have been fuels management programs implemented, combined with effective land use planning, that the effects of fire have

been minimized. Prevention has to be the cornerstone of our efforts to curtail and minimize the effects of these devastating fires.

The question has been asked: what lessons have we learned from the 2003 Fire Siege. The answer quite frankly is that we know the answers, and there are no new lessons to be learned. In 1966 the County Supervisors Association in conjunction with the Forest Fire Protection Agencies wrote, "Haphazard development of the mountain wildland areas set the scene for disaster. Structural fire losses from forest fires have been great and losses have been increasing in recent years. Firefighting forces alone cannot always furnish protection measures to compensate for hazardous conditions; they must be planned and built into subdivisions and other development." The report recommended "comprehensive and coordinated land-use planning." The recommendations also include "declaration of hazardous fire areas, clearance of flammable vegetation around developments, provision for local government fire protection, safe ingress and egress, control of building construction and building density through adoption of standard building codes and zones ordinances, and lastly establishment of community fuel breaks."

In 1970 California was burning. In 13 days there were 773 fires burning over 570,000 acres, consuming 772 homes with 16 lives lost. The Secretary of Resources for the state established a 21-member task force to develop recommendations to prevent similar fire sieges in the future. The Task Force recommended among other things fuel and hazard reduction programs, land use and building code changes, and expanded fire prevention programs.

Again in 1972, 1978, 1980, 1985, 1991, 1993 California experienced devastating fires with large numbers of homes, lives, and critical habitat lost. Task forces were formed and reports written with recommendations very similar to those included in the recent Blue Ribbon Fire Commission report.

In almost all of the cases the recommendations that dealt with suppression effort improvements have been made and recommendations implemented. In California over the years we have seen the creation of FIRESCOPE, a state-sponsored body that developed the Incident Command System (ICS). ICS is the basis for the National Incident Management System (NIMS). FIRESCOPE also has developed the most advanced mutual aid system in the country, as evidenced by the mobilization and management of over 1,000 fire resources from all over California and surrounding states, representing all levels of local, state and federal government during the recent Southern California Fire Siege.

The most glaring deficiency in the ongoing fire problem in California is our inability to address the issues of land use, land use planning, building code standards, and the balance between environmental concerns for habitat and endangered species preservation, and fuels management. In 2002 Congress and the Federal Land Management Agencies asked the National Academy of Public Administrators to examine 6 fires that occurred in 2002 and make recommendations regarding wild life risk assessment, interagency

coordination, containment of suppression costs, and better utilization of local firefighting resources. The series of reports concluded that, “The nation’s readiness and capacity for hazard reduction was the least developed of all the critical issues related to wild fire suppression.” The reports also concluded that if any progress was to be made to reduce risk and preserve wildland areas, “It will increasingly depend on intergovernmental and public private partnerships capable of reducing large-scale risks affecting multiple owners.”

Some progress has been made to bring together the stakeholder groups to develop common goals and practices in California. Through the efforts of the California Fire Safe Council, there are over 100 local Fire Safe Councils that have brought stakeholders together including the private sector, environmental groups, local planners, and community representatives. The Fire Safe Councils have been very effective in championing the cause of fuels treatments and fire prevention. The major challenge the councils face is the lack of funding to implement fuels management programs.

The California Fire Alliance was formed bringing together federal, state and local government agencies that play a role in fire policy to coordinate efforts towards implementation of the National Fire Plan at the local level. Membership includes: California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, U.S. Forest Service, California Fire Safe Councils, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Governor’s Office of Emergency Services, Los Angeles County Fire Department, National Park Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife.

The Fire Alliance has formed a grants clearing house that provides a streamlined online grant application process for National Fire Plan grants. This program has been very successful in moving what limited funding has been available from state and federal agencies to the local level. There have also been several FIREWISE workshops held throughout California designed to support the concepts of the Fire Safe Councils in bringing stakeholders together to work on hazard reduction and fire prevention challenges for the local communities. The ongoing critical challenge is to have state and federal agencies allocate more funding to these local programs.

The education and sharing of perspectives of the different stakeholders, including private property owners, environmental groups, planners and fire service professionals, are keys to developing a unified approach to addressing the concepts of fire safe communities. The California Fire Chiefs Association, in conjunction with Fire Engineering Magazine, held two Wildland Fire Summits in San Diego in an effort to establish these relationships. Ten states were represented along with local, regional, and national leaders. The results of the 2003 Summit, including 29 specific recommendations for improvement, have been submitted as part of my testimony. The one glaring factor that came from the 2004 Summit was the need to include more representation of the environmental community. Plans are already underway for California Fire Chiefs Association to bring together the environmental community, along with local and county planners to establish those relationships, and to develop more consensus around fuels management issues.

The California League Cities and the California State Association of Counties have developed a joint resolution, which speaks to the need for better coordination and streamlining of legislative and regulatory mandates that have become an impediment to pre-fire mitigations and prevention efforts. Both bodies have pledged: to act as a clearing house for local government to sort through conflicting regulations and forward those on to federal and state legislators; to consider legislation that will expedite the adoption of a state-wide wildland urban interface construction, and development standards; and to sponsor public forums to begin the discussion about other legislation.

Even with these positive efforts moving forward, there are still areas where focused attention must be placed. The first is having a coordinated political effort between local, state, and federal-elected officials to legislate standardized regulations for fuels management, and building and zoning standards. In the most recent Southern California siege, there was an effort to put forward by a city building department to increase code requirements to insure fire safe elements were included in the building reconstruction. It went before the City Council and was rejected by the Council after public comments. The lack of political will to enforce more stringent building standards and fuels management programs will only exacerbate the problems. As California begins to digest the recommendation of the Blue Ribbon Fire Commission report, our biggest concern is the lack of political will to move the recommendations forward. The issues of wildland fire impact all levels of government and can only be addressed if all levels of government are part of the solution.

The issue of sustained funding, for prevention and pre-fire mitigation efforts, presents the biggest challenge. The report to Congress by the National Association of Public Administrators concurs that funding for pre-fire mitigation efforts has been very difficult to secure on an ongoing basis. Funding from the federal government for these types of programs is analogous to virga, rain that falls from the sky but evaporates before it hits the ground.

Grants from the federal government come from two different departments and five different agencies: each with their own set of priorities; each with different matching requirements ranging from no match to a 100% match; each with different timing and reporting requirements; and most importantly each with a different system of communicating the opportunities to local communities. Depending on the policy of each agency the funding can only be used on federal lands unless they decide it can be used on local land. Even funding dedicated for use on federal lands doesn't always make it there either. Each forest is given a line item for fuels management programs, but is free to move that funding to other programs if there is a shortage in some other program. In California this disconnected, uncoordinated process caused the formation of the Fire Alliance, to act as a clearing house in an effort to support the work of the Fire Safe Councils. Even with the attempts to coordinate the grant process, the system does not promote participation and clearly does not receive sufficient funding to come close to addressing the need.

The grants that have been offered through the National Fire Plan have been well received, but the total amount available for these efforts has been diminishing. In 2004 there has been a 64% decrease in funding for these types of programs through the Forest Service, and a 35% decrease from the Bureau of Land Management, while both agencies received significant increases in their suppression budgets.

Today in California there are over 1,100 communities that have been identified as at risk, and over 850 are adjacent to federal lands. This year there were 393 grants submitted totaling over 49 million dollars, and there will be less than 7 million dollars available.

The recent passage of the Healthy Forest Initiative at face value appears to begin to address critical fuels management issues, but the primary issue still remains funding. It remains to be seen though if it will create significant change. In California we have forged relationships with our federal partners, but the funds available to begin to address the fuels management issues have not been there. We are optimistic the legislation will provide increased resources, but it is too soon to tell what outcomes we can expect.

California in the last two months has experienced wild fires during a time of the year that has historically not been fire season. Most recently over 2,000 acres burned in Riverside County, adjacent to the bark beetle infested forest in San Bernardino County where something less than 3% of the dead trees were consumed during the Siege of 2003. The fire season has now become a year-round challenge, and the threat of wild fire continues to grow.

Our inability as a society to adequately come together and find common ground that balances property rights, environmental concerns for vegetation and habitat preservation, and economic interests while providing adequate funding to implement the identified projects, has set up a situation where we will continue to experience larger and more devastating wildland fires. The economic and societal impacts of these fires will continue to become more problematic as time goes on.

I am hopeful that through the efforts of our federal and state partners we can finally implement a consistent agenda before we destroy more forests and homes where critical habitat and human lives are lost.