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Opening Statement

Congressman Dennis J. Kucinich, Chairman

Domestic Policy Subcommittee

Oversight and Government Reform Committee

“What the October Wildfires Reveal about Preparedness in Southern California”

Board Meeting Room, Fallbrook Public Utilities District

Monday, December 10, 2007

9:00 A. M.

Good morning and welcome. The Domestic Policy Subcommittee of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee will come to order.

On October 21st, a wildfire began in Witch Creek, a rural area in the foothills of San Diego. That same day, Governor Schwarzenegger declared a state of emergency. President George W. Bush issued a major disaster declaration for the State of California and ordered federal aid to supplement State and local response efforts. At the height of the disaster, 23 fires were burning. By the time all the fires were contained, 517,267 acres of land had been burned; 2,233 homes were destroyed; and ten people lost their lives.

The damage caused by the 2007 Southern California wildfires could have been much worse were it not for the capable response efforts of local, state, and federal emergency responders. The absence of additional fires in San Diego's surrounding counties and in Northern California also helped to make the story of Southern California's wildfires a success.

Everyone, from local, state, and federal officials to media outlets, has described the response to the wildfires as a wonderful success. And the emergency responders and the intergovernmental coordination that managed firefighting resources were performed competently, effectively and

preparation for future wildfires, then we have to consider how those same fire responders and intergovernmental coordination managers would have fared if they had been confronted with a different fire, or a number of simultaneous fires in several different counties. How much of October's success can be attributed to adequate training, management and resources, and how much of it was a function of luck, that California did not have other fires to contend with at the same time?

The fires that burned throughout Orange, Los Angeles, and San Diego Counties are certainly not the last to impact Southern California. Southern California has historically endured major fires. It did so in 1970, 1977, 1980, 1985, 1987, 1993, 2003, and now in 2007. However, not only have major fires been less frequent than they have been recently, but they have also been less severe. Both the 2003 Cedar Fires and the 2007 Southern California Wildfires have been described as "100 year" fires. Unfortunately, future trends indicate that such disasters are on the rise.

According to the Wildfire Research Network, the frequency and ferocity of wildfires will increase in the near future due to global warming, increasing wildland-urban interface, and aging vegetation. According to the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, ten trends constitute the "Wildfire Frequency and Intensity Loop," including a rise in global warming and a growing population in wildfire-urban interface.

Is Southern California adequately prepared for these major fires?

Disaster preparedness involves several considerations such as prevention measures, public education, and pre-existing agreements. Most importantly however, disaster preparedness means having the proper resources and having enough of them.

In California, resources are owned by local responders, bolstered by state resources as well as mutual aid agreements within the state, and supplemented by federal fire and emergency agencies.

Different counties have vastly differing levels of local response capability. The Los Angeles County fire department possesses a total of 13 firefighting aircraft during fire season. Orange County fire department possesses two aircraft. San Diego County has two helicopters.

The County of San Diego spent nearly \$130 million dollars to enhance its wildfire prevention, preparation and response abilities. These improvements included purchasing two wildfire helicopters; improving its emergency communications system; removing 417,000 dead, dying, and diseased trees; and implementing a Reverse 911 system. All of these resources were mobilized to deal with the October fires.

Additionally, the State of California contributed its 13 National Guard helicopters and 23 air tankers.

Yet all of these resources were not enough on their own. California tapped into the Emergency Management Agency Compact (EMAC) system and obtained assistance from Arizona, Idaho, North Carolina, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, Wyoming, Washington, and Oregon.

The federal government also supplemented local and state resources. The US Forest Service (USFS) of the Department of Agriculture has approximately 10,000 firefighters, 3-400 fire engines, 30-40 helicopters, and 8 fixed air tankers that it made available to California during its battle with the 2007 fires.

It took everything the counties and State of California could muster, and more from the federal government, to contain and extinguish the October fires. Our witnesses have told us again and again, that had there been any fires in Northern California, as there were in 2003, that some of the resources used to fight the October fires would not have been available. Imagine—had there been only four additional fires in Northern California, there would not have been sufficient resources to respond to all of them. Southern California was indeed lucky. Lucky because no other fires burned in California during those last few days of October.

But what if Southern California is not so lucky the next time, when in four to five years another “100 year” fire ignites and consumes Southern California and this time, five fires also burn in the Oakland Hills?

Then it might matter that San Diego County is the *only* county in California without a fire department. Instead the County has a total of 65 [volunteer-based and paid] fire agencies. In 2004, 81 percent of voters in San Diego County approved Proposition C which queried support for a consolidated system and was to be funded with reprioritized revenues, but no new revenues. Due to its lack of a County Fire Department, San Diego County is dependent on San Diego City’s Fire-Rescue Department as well as on its neighboring counties with well-resourced fire departments. Today we will hear from several witnesses on our first panel as to whether or not this arrangement is sustainable.

The next time there is a “100 year” fire, how will the Modular Airborne Firefighting Systems or “MAFS” help? The MAF system was not put to use during the recent wildfires because the Forest Service’s re-furbished tanks were not ready for the California National Guard’s new J model C-130 aircraft. According to the Fire and Aviation Management, the fully-equipped J-C130’s will be ready in May or June 2008.

The next time, will a new agreement correct for Cal Fire’s failure to utilize Marine helicopters? According to Cal Fire, they have addressed this problem by entering into a short-term agreement with the Marines in the direct aftermath of the fires. More recently, Cal Fire and the Marines continued their discussions on a long term operating plan.

Our job today is to ask our witnesses what more could be done and will be operable in Southern California to ensure that any future response is as successful as it fortunately was in October 2007.