



Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington DC 20515

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March 16, 2018

**SUMMARY OF SUBJECT MATTER**

**TO:** Members, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management  
**FROM:** Staff, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management  
**RE:** Subcommittee Hearing on “Impacts of the 2017 Wildfires in the United States”

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**PURPOSE**

The Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management will meet on Tuesday, March 20, 2018, at 10:30 a.m. in 2167 Rayburn House Office Building for a hearing entitled “Impacts of the 2017 Wildfires in the United States.” The purpose of the hearing is to explore the lessons learned from the catastrophic 2017 wildfires, inform long-term policy solutions, and highlight the importance of mitigation, including provisions contained in the *Disaster Recovery Reform Act* (DRRA). The Subcommittee will hear from witnesses representing the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), and state and local emergency management agencies and fire departments.

**BACKGROUND**

**Overview of the 2017 Wildfire Season**

In a year of much extreme weather marked by massive hurricanes that devastated Texas, Florida, and the Caribbean, 2017 also included one of the worst wildfire seasons in United States history. Nationwide, over 66,000 wildfires burned over 9.7 million acres of land.<sup>1</sup> In California, alone, over 7,000 wildfires burned through over a half million acres of land.<sup>2</sup> Fierce Santa Ana winds, dry brush and dead trees, combined with human activity, fueled the start of most of the fires. The 2017 wildfires set ablaze a significant portion of the state of California – spreading as far north as the Oregon border and as far south as San Diego. In addition to California, the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/fire/201713>.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics provided by CalFire, available at [http://cdfdata.fire.ca.gov/incidents/incidents\\_statsevents](http://cdfdata.fire.ca.gov/incidents/incidents_statsevents).

wildfires raged across the Western United States, hitting 10 states in total including parts of Arizona, Oregon, Montana, Nevada, and Washington.<sup>3</sup>

The Thomas Fire, the most destructive of the 2017 California wildfires, was first reported on December 4, 2017, and quickly became the largest wildfire ever to be recorded in California.<sup>4</sup> In total, the Thomas Fire destroyed 281,620 acres of land and an estimated 1,063 structures and threatened another 18,000 structures. The Thomas Fire was finally declared contained on January 12, 2018. Approximately \$177 million was spent on fighting the Thomas Fire alone. At least 95,000 Californians were forced to evacuate their homes due to the 2017 wildfires.

The 2017 wildfire season was the most destructive and the costliest for California in its history and the third most destructive season nationwide.<sup>5</sup> The California fires charred hundreds of thousands of acres, scorched California's wine country, damaged critical infrastructure, and triggered the evacuation of thousands of families throughout a number of California counties. Forty-three deaths were reported as a result of the blazes, a total that makes this series of fires the deadliest in California history.

### **Federal Assistance for Wildfires**

FEMA is the federal government's lead agency in preparing for, mitigating against, responding to, and recovering from disasters and emergencies related to all hazards – whether natural or man-made. FEMA's primary authority in carrying out these functions stems from the *Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act* (Stafford Act, P.L. 100-707). The Stafford Act authorizes three types of declarations: (1) Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) Program declarations; (2) emergency declarations; and (3) major disaster declarations.

#### **Fire Management Assistance Grant Program**

Section 420 of the Stafford Act authorizes FEMA to provide fire management assistance to state, local, and tribal governments for the mitigation, management, and control of any fires burning on publicly or privately owned forests or grasslands that threatens such destruction as would constitute a major disaster. FMAG funding may be used for equipment and supplies, labor costs, emergency work, pre-positioning of resources, and temporary repair of damage caused by work directly related to firefighting activities associated with the declared fire. A state initiates the FMAG process by submitting a request for assistance to the FEMA Regional Director at the time the wildfire presents a "threat of major disaster". FEMA processes the request on an expedited basis and FMAGs provide a 75 percent federal cost share with the state responsible for the remaining 25 percent of actual costs. Before a FMAG is declared, a state must demonstrate that total eligible costs for the declared fire meets or exceeds either the

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<sup>3</sup> "Statistics" from the National Interagency Fire Center, available at [https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/fireInfo\\_statistics.html](https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/fireInfo_statistics.html) (Accessed March 14, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, "December wildfires scorch southern California in 2017." December 15, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Statistics provided by CalFire, available at [http://cdfdata.fire.ca.gov/incidents/incidents\\_statsevents](http://cdfdata.fire.ca.gov/incidents/incidents_statsevents) (Accessed March 14, 2018).

individual fire cost threshold, which is applied to single fires, or the cumulative fire cost threshold, which recognizes numerous smaller fires burning throughout a state.<sup>6</sup>

### Presidentially Declared Major Disaster

When state and local resources are overwhelmed and the “disaster is of such severity and magnitude that effective response is beyond the capabilities of the state and the affected local governments,”<sup>4</sup> the Governor of the affected state may request the President to declare a major disaster. FEMA’s primary Stafford Act programs for disaster response and recovery in the aftermath of a major disaster are in the Public Assistance Program and the Individual Assistance Program. As part of each major disaster, FEMA also provides Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) funds.

The Public Assistance Program, authorized primarily by Sections 403, 406, and 407 of the Stafford Act, reimburses state, tribal, and local emergency response costs and provides grants to state and local governments, as well as certain private non-profits to rebuild facilities. The Public Assistance Program generally does not provide direct services to citizens.

The Individual Assistance Program, authorized primarily by section 408 of the Stafford Act and also known as the Individuals and Households Program, provides assistance to families and individuals impacted by disasters, including housing assistance. Housing assistance includes money for repair, rental assistance, or “direct assistance,” such as the provision of temporary housing.

Section 404 of the Stafford Act authorizes HMGP, which provides grants to state and local governments to rebuild after a disaster in ways that: (1) are cost effective; and (2) reduce the risk of future damage, hardship, and loss from natural hazards such as wildfires. The central purpose of this grant program is to enact practical mitigation measures that effectively reduce the risk of loss of life and property from future disasters. FEMA provides grants under HMGP to assist families in reducing the risk to their homes from natural disasters. In the case of wildfires, mitigation measures covered by HMGP include, but are not limited to: establishing defensible space measures around buildings; using fire-resistant building materials; and regularly clearing combustibles that could serve as fuel for a wildfire. FEMA provides up to 75 percent of the funds for mitigation projects under HMGP and the remaining 25 percent can come from a variety of sources (i.e., a cash payment from the state or local government).<sup>7</sup>

### The Case of California

On October 9, 2017, the California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) secured 10 FMAGs in one day from FEMA to help ensure the availability of vital resources to suppress wildfires burning statewide. The FMAGs also enable local, state and tribal agencies to recover eligible costs. FEMA issued a Major Disaster Declaration for the wildfires burning through California on October 10, 2017. The California counties of Butte, Lake, Mendocino,

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<sup>6</sup> “Fire Management Assistance Grant Program,” Federal Emergency Management Agency *Fema.gov*. (Accessed March 14, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> “Hazard Mitigation Grant Program,” Federal Emergency Management Agency,” *Fema.gov*. (Accessed March 14, 2018).

Napa, Nevada, Orange, Sonoma, and Yuba were all designated as eligible for assistance following the President’s major disaster declaration. To date, FEMA has approved 4,475 Individual Assistance applications and obligated \$210,475,488 in Public Assistance grants.<sup>8</sup>

On December 8, 2017, the President issued a second Major Disaster Declaration, approving California’s request for direct federal assistance to support the response to the Southern California wildfires. On January 15, 2018, the President issued a third Major Disaster Declaration allowing residents of Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, and San Diego counties to register for disaster assistance with FEMA.<sup>9</sup>

For these events, the State Operations Center is activated to coordinate resources in support of communities being affected by the fires. State, local and federal agencies work together around the clock to support emergency management efforts and provide all the necessary resources. Cal OES will request resources, such as engine strike teams, from other states via the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC),<sup>10</sup> as well as coordinate and collaborate with other states for additional resources.

For the Southern California Fires, Cal OES coordinated mutual aid resources of 2,700 firefighters, 611 engines and a total of 117 strike teams and task forces (24 Cal OES strike teams/task forces and 93 local government strike teams/task forces). They also managed the largest wildfire debris removal operation in California history, moving over a half million tons of debris.

### **Committee Leadership on Disaster Policy Reform**

#### **The Disaster Recovery Reform Act (DRRA)**

On November 30, 2017, the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure unanimously approved DRRA. The House added the DRRA policy proposals to the third disaster supplemental appropriations bill, H.R. 4667, which was passed by the House on December 12, 2017, but these policy provisions were not included in the final bill that was signed into law.

DRRA places greater emphasis on pre-disaster mitigation, and incentivizes states to invest in stronger mitigation measures helping to ensure that our communities are well-equipped to better prepare for and withstand disasters of all kinds. For every one dollar spent on mitigation activities, six dollars is saved. There is a clear return on investments in mitigation. DRRA deals directly with wildfire prevention by permanently amending the Stafford Act to allow HMGP funds to be generated from fire management assistance grants.

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<sup>8</sup> California Wildfires (DR-4344), “Federal Emergency Management Agency,” *Fema.gov*. (Accessed March 14, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services. “Emergency Proclamations and Declarations.”

<sup>10</sup> EMAC is an interstate compact approved by Congress that provides an effective avenue by which states can provide one another mutual aid in the event of a disaster. Through EMAC, a state impacted by a disaster can request and receive assistance from other member states more quickly and efficiently.

## **CONCLUSION**

The 2017 wildfire season led to a record number of deaths and destroyed infrastructure throughout California and other states. The rebuilding that must be done in the wake of the fires provides an opportunity to encourage smart, resilient rebuilding, increased mitigation measures, and cost-effective federal investments. The central takeaways and lessons learned from last year's catastrophic wildfire season will help inform how to strengthen our ability to withstand disasters of all types across the Nation.

## **WITNESS LIST**

Mr. Robert J. Fenton, Jr.  
Regional Administrator, Region IX  
Federal Emergency Management Agency

Mr. Mark Ghilarducci  
Director, Governor's Office of Emergency Services  
State of California

Mr. Eric Holly  
Deputy Fire Warden, Deputy Director of Emergency Services  
Stanislaus County, California

Mr. Thomas Jenkins  
President and Chairman of the Board  
International Association of Fire Chiefs