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STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

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Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management

Impacts of the 2017 Wildfires in the United States

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Introduction

Chairman Barletta, Ranking Member Titus, and members of the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management. Thank you very much for the opportunity to address the Subcommittee on what ended up being one of the worst fire seasons in California history.

The California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) oversaw the coordination of response and recovery efforts for the devastating 2017 wildfire season, and as Director of Cal OES it is my responsibility facilitate and effective response and aid in enhancing future response efforts by considering the lessons we have learned. The fire season in California has become almost year-round, stretching the resources of local, state, and federal public safety agencies. As we evaluate how we can better prepare for future events and mitigate any future damages, it is important to recognize the vital assistance and close coordination provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the federal government. The continuing strong partnership between local, state and federal agencies and offices is essential to saving lives and property in the disasters to come.

This testimony will focus on response and recovery to the 2017 wildfires, including lessons learned, and recommendations for the future to mitigate damages, increase preparedness, and aid first responders.

The 2017 California Wildfires

Beginning on October 8, and following into October 9, 2017, over 100 wildfires broke out in Mendocino, Solano, Sonoma, Napa, Yuba, Butte, Nevada, and Orange counties. The most destructive fire in California history, the Tubbs Fire, caused massive devastation to the City of Santa Rosa and its outlying communities, destroying 8,900 structures. Only two months later, a second series of fires began in Southern California, assisted by a delayed and extended Santa Ana wind event. The Thomas Fire spread across Santa Barbara and Ventura counties and became the largest blaze in California history, engulfing more than 280,000 acres over the course of a month. This past year, 46 people perished in the Northern and Southern California wildfires, with an additional 20 confirmed fatalities in the subsequent Montecito mudslides in January 2018.

The October and December fires were simply a crescendo to an already long and exhausting fire season. Over the course of 2017, a total of 9,133 fires scorched an estimated 1.24 million acres of land across the state. The lack of precipitation between 2012 and 2015 represented the driest seasons in California history, with a state-declared drought emergency in effect from 2014 to 2017. The drought exacerbated fire conditions by increasing dry, vegetative fuel availability. The record rainfall of 2016 and 2017 did little to curb these dangerous conditions, and caused excessive crop and overgrown brush that served as kindling for following wildfires. On the night

of October 8, some Northern California regions experienced winds of 50 miles per hour, with gusts of 79 miles per hour reported in Sonoma County. The ferocity of the northern California fires was the product of weather patterns that are becoming more common, and contributed to a perfect confluence of factors that ultimately caused the destruction of entire communities.

Coordinating Rapid, Effective Response

Almost immediately after these wildfires began, it became clear that additional resources would be necessary to supplement local firefighting efforts. Cal OES, through the State's Mutual Aid System and through the activation of the National Emergency Management Assistance Compact, worked to provide rapid and systematic mobilization, organization, and operation of fire, law enforcement, and other emergency services, including thousands of National Guard air and ground assets. The response to these events was a massive undertaking and incorporated assets from local, state, federal, private sector, and even international agencies. Through a memorandum of understanding between Cal OES and the State of Victoria, Australia, California also received assistance from over 30 Victoria firefighters. Over 400 state and local government and 200 out-of-state fire departments sent engines, crews, overhead, pickup trucks, and air assets to the October and December wildfire complexes.

As was the case during the 2017 Oroville Dam emergency, California activated a Unified Coordination Group (UCG) on the first day of the October wildfires to lead the overall coordination of the response and recovery efforts. The UCG operates out of the State Operations Center and is comprised of members of the Governor's cabinet, leadership from the Governor's Office, Cal OES, CAL FIRE, the California Highway Patrol, California Department of Transportation, California Health and Human Services Agency, California Department of Food & Agriculture, and other key state agencies with statutory authorities for public safety and property protection. FEMA is a cornerstone member of the UCG as well. As the emergency is unfolding and decisions are being made rapidly, having FEMA at the table with state agencies early allows for close coordination and has proven to help California streamline and receive the rapid assistance it needs.

Debris Removal

Recovery efforts to remove disaster-related debris from these disasters are unprecedented in scale. This massive undertaking represents the single largest debris removal project in California since the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire. To date, over 1.6 million tons of debris has been removed from affected areas in Northern California, which is approximately the same weight as two Golden Gate Bridges. This has been accomplished through a close coordination between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and the California Department of Resources, Recycling, and Recovery (CalRecycle) which performed debris removal in two distinct branches. USACE managed debris removal operations in Mendocino, Lake, Napa, and Sonoma counties, while CalRecycle managed operations in Butte, Yuba, and Nevada counties.

In Southern California, private property debris removal stands at about 60 percent complete with 289 parcels remaining to be cleared. Local agencies in Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, and San Diego counties, in conjunction with CalRecycle operating in Ventura County, are removing debris from public rights-of-way property and repairing infrastructure damaged by debris flows. At the request of the state, USACE enacted scaled programs to clear massive debris basins and waterways in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. The continuing debris removal mission across in California exemplifies the cooperation between local, state, and federal agencies. At this crucial juncture, removing disaster debris is critical in enabling survivors of the fires to move forward and begin a path to recovery.

The partnership between USACE and the State of California has exposed opportunities for future growth and examples of best practices in large-scale debris removal operations. In the immediate aftermath of the Northern California fires, objectives of mutual interest communication between the state and USACE was challenged by process and contracting differences between the agencies. The Incident Command System (ICS), a foundational principle of command and control in emergency management, was not utilized by USACE to organize at the field level. Given the large number of contractors and subcontractors involved due to the complexity of the debris removal operations, ICS was necessary to elevate and solve problems quickly with a singular point of contact. Limitations on the span of control within ICS force effective and efficient communication between organizational hierarchies. With the help of CAL FIRE, USACE was able to successfully transition to an ICS organizational model at the field level. As a result, the efficacy of operations was instantly increased. In future operations, it would benefit USACE to operate in an ICS model pursuant to the National Incident Management System (NIMS), which is based on the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS). As a comprehensive national model of incident management required of federal agencies, adherence to NIMS would greatly improve USACE's ability to integrate itself with partner agencies.

Debris removal is a vital first step in allowing communities to rebuild after disasters. During the initial debris removal phase in Northern California, USACE required operational decisions to be fed up a chain of command to the Washington, D.C. headquarters. This elongated decision structure delayed important decisions related to hazardous materials and contractual issues where urgent response was needed to protect public health. Organizational bureaucracy prevented USACE on the ground from rendering immediate decisions and field staff were only able to offer educated guesses on the outcome of problems until they were sent up the full chain of command. To quickly and effectively address urgent emergency management issues, USACE should delegate authority to their leadership on the ground.

However, the recovery process for both wildfire events also highlighted successes in the partnership between Cal OES and USACE. California has heightened safety laws and environmental standards for debris removal. USACE was very receptive to California's strict

adherence of these standards, and actively worked to meet them. Further collaboration between the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) and its state counterparts, the California Environmental Protection Agency and the California Department of Toxic Substances Control, resulted in effective and efficient initial sweeps of household hazardous materials due to enhanced coordination and agreement on adherence to these California standards.

There were debates in the field about ground-level policies and procedures, but these were able to be resolved amicably with compromise. For example, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) standards vary between federal and state agencies. Where the state deemed these PPE requirements unnecessary and even dangerous to operational safety, the state and federal agencies were able to conclude the application of PPE requirements depended on individual circumstances. This flexibility and rationality between partner agencies fostered greater cooperation and allowed for rapid clean-up of hazardous household waste.

Individual Assistance and Small Business Administration Disaster Loan Programs

In coordination with local jurisdictions, Local Assistance Centers (LACs) were established to assist victims in navigating the recovery process and to obtain state and federal resources. Strategically placed throughout affected areas in Northern and Southern California, LACs offered in-person support to individuals and business owners in areas designated for Individual Assistance (IA) programs by the Presidential Major Disaster Declaration. Recovery specialists from the Department of Motor Vehicles, Department of Insurance, Contractor State Licensing Board, FEMA, the United States Small Business Administration (SBA), and other local government and private and community nonprofit organizations were represented at the LACs to disseminate programmatic information and provide application-filing assistance. Cal OES developed a website to assist individuals, businesses, and local government in finding information on applicable programs and contacts, and inform the community of major updates and events.

As it has in numerous past disasters, the state encountered a significant road block in rapidly obtaining a declaration for the SBA Disaster Loan Program. SBA policy prohibits the SBA from authorizing the Disaster Loan Program, which brings vital low-interest loans to individuals and businesses in affected regions, until FEMA has made a decision on whether to authorize Individual Assistance (IA) programs. A state may have received a Presidential Disaster Declaration, but there is often significant delay in receiving an IA decision due to a lengthy Preliminary Damage Assessment, or because a state is in the process of appealing an IA denial from FEMA. In both cases, the region affected by the disaster may have easily met the criteria for an SBA declaration, but this essential aid is hindered by dependence on FEMA's IA decision.

After the 2014 Napa Earthquake, the SBA Disaster Loan Program approval process lasted ten weeks. During this time, some businesses closed their doors and others moved out of the area, but ultimately the economic recovery of the region was harmed. Given these challenges, the SBA

disaster assistance program request process needs to be expedited to get essential funding to qualified individuals, households, and businesses as quickly as possible and to keep the economy from suffering in the days and weeks immediately following a major disaster event. The SBA Administrator should be unburdened from red tape preventing declaration when damages clearly meet the SBA criteria, regardless a state's intent to request Stafford Act programs through FEMA and the President. The SBA has indicated its eligible contiguous county policy would cause confusion and possible unfairness if an SBA declaration and a Presidential declaration, after the fact, included different eligible counties. California suggests this is something that can be remedied through your assistance, if necessary, or between FEMA and SBA in order to expedite recovery.

Short-Term and Long-Term Housing Solutions

Housing solutions for survivors continues to be a top priority for Cal OES. Shortly after the October fires began, Cal OES and FEMA established a Joint Housing Task Force dedicated to two goals: identifying short-term and long-term housing solutions. Short-term housing was a joint federal-state effort, including partnerships at the local level and with the private sector achieved through contributions from the private sector, leveraged with state capabilities and properties, and federal resources. When IA was authorized for the Northern California wildfires, Transitional Sheltering Assistance, Housing Assistance, Direct Housing and Other Needs Assistance programs provided housing assistance and financial aid to eligible disaster survivors. Although there are many circumstances that can lead to delays in the dissemination of program funding, these programs have provided a necessary lifeline for survivors of the Northern California wildfires. Updated direct housing solutions and housing programs should be reviewed for more expedient ways to achieve survivors' post-disaster housing needs.

With regard to the long-term housing solutions, Cal OES continues to work in close coordination with local government leaders, state housing partners, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to identify long term solutions for survivors, as well as identify mitigation measures which can be taken to avoid wildfire destruction in the future. We look forward to working with Congress and federal agencies on the allocation of valuable U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Development Block Grant funding to California and other impacted states that have suffered housing losses in the past year.

Infrastructure Investments

California has actively worked to sustain and promote partnership from the private sector, including investor-owned utility and telecommunications partners. Infrastructure system modernization and enhancements must be made across the United States to mitigate risks and lower disaster costs to local communities and federal taxpayers.

The devastation of the 2017 California wildfires highlighted the importance of robust, reliable emergency alert and communications systems. During the October wildfires, the California Public Utilities Commission reported a total of 341 cell sites as destroyed or offline. With approximately 80 percent of 9-1-1 calls coming from cellular devices, this impacted not only individuals attempting to reach 9-1-1, but also impacted the ability for people to receive wireless alerts and to access the Internet and detailed information about the fire. Wireless alerting requires a survivable (non-impacted) cellular network. Both 9-1-1 calls and alerts and warnings can only be received if the system remains on the air during a disaster.

In addition to ensuring the network is available, there is a need for a unified emergency alert system. Since different methods are currently being used to reach the public, it would be helpful to have a standardized message format for all delivery platforms that could be sent one time to all users. Education, best practices and outreach is also needed to help local officials determine which alerting method or methods should be used during a disaster.

Federal support with legislation and funding is needed to improve 9-1-1 resiliencies. Hardening of the cellular networks would initially require the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to direct the cellular carriers to harden the infrastructure, improve carrier reporting, and increase training and outreach regarding the limitations of the current cellular network. Although all carriers adhere to baseline regulatory and statutory requirements, enhancing these requirements based on best practices for wireless providers may be the only way to ensure the cellular network is available when needed. A functioning cellular network is required for the wireless emergency alerts and warning to mitigate loss of life and property.

Emergency Management Performance Grants

As the State of California looks to the future with our local and tribal communities, private sector and non-profit partners, and federal counterparts, there are actions needed to prepare for and mitigate the effects of future disasters. Across the nation, response and recovery costs to public agencies and first responders are increasing at an untenable rate. If local, state, and federal emergency management agencies are to keep pace with these dynamic disasters, there need to be proactive, targeted investments made towards reducing the cost of response and recovery.

FEMA's Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG) enables funding for state, local, and tribal governments to prepare for all hazards through planning, training, exercises, and professional development. It supports agency response capabilities, emergency operations centers, mutual aid agreements, and public outreach campaigns, including community alerts and warning notification systems. Together with other forward-leaning measures, California has leveraged these EMPG funds to help build preparedness throughout all levels of government.

In fiscal year 2017, Congress committed $350 million to EMPG which, factoring in the minimum-required dollar-for-dollar match, translates to an impact exceeding $700 million. The President's Fiscal Year 2019 Budget proposes a $71 million decrease in EMPG funding, to $279 million. However, according to data from a survey taken by the National Emergency Management

Association, the number of disasters nationwide has risen by forty percent since 2013. The National Emergency Management Association is advocating for a five percent increase in EMPG funding for fiscal year 2019, however we believe that a much greater investment should be made to this invaluable program. After witnessing the devastation caused by the 2017 wildfires, our state and local governments understand now more than ever the importance of building all-hazards emergency management capacity at the local, state, and tribal levels. Without maintaining mature emergency management systems, more disasters will exceed state and local capabilities, requiring costlier federal response and recovery support.

Conclusion

The economic impact of these events cannot be understated as suppression and recovery costs have exceeded all estimated budgetary needs. We are appreciative that the Congress passed the latest federal disaster appropriation. This funding, allocated through FEMA, Department of Agriculture, Small Business Administration, and other agencies, will go a long way to aid communities in impacted regions throughout our state.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and for your ongoing support of disaster resiliency, response, and recovery in the face of increasingly escalating threats. I look forward to answering your questions.