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STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

Before the United States House of Representatives

Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management

Impacts of the 2017 Wildfires in the United States

Tuesday, March 20, 2018

2167 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, DC

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Chairman Barletta, Congressman Johnson, and members of the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management. I'm pleased to be here today to share with the Subcommittee our experiences in Sonoma County, and the lessons we have learned, relating to the horrible wildfires that so tragically struck our County just five months ago. I would also like to express our special appreciation to Congressman Huffman, who serves so well on this Committee, and to Congressman Thompson, for their diligence and responsiveness in helping us respond to the worst disaster to strike the County during the lifetimes of any of our residents.

I am here before you in both a professional and personal capacity, for I am both a County Supervisor - whose district lost thousands of homes - and a survivor - who personally lost her home in the fire siege. I represent Sonoma County, located 45 miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge. Our beautiful and hardworking county of 500,000 is the heart of Wine Country and the Gateway to the Redwood Empire. On the evening of October 8th and into the early morning hours of October 9th, our community was overtaken by several wildfires. The wildfires burned through complete neighborhoods in just a few hours. Tragically, our county alone lost 24 people, of which the vast majority were elderly. Receiving more than 350 calls per hour, our local 911 dispatch system handled over 800 reported fires in the first 24 hours. Given the number of fires and the speed at which they advanced, the system was overwhelmed. That evening, we had to evacuate two of our three hospitals and over 100,000 residents, one-fifth of our population. In total, the fire burned over 100,000 acres in Sonoma County and destroyed 5,200 homes.

I want to thank Director Ghilarducci and the California Office of Emergency Services, as well as Administrator Fenton and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, for their unwavering support of Sonoma County over the past several months. Their efforts have made a real difference.

I'm here today to share a few observations from the fires with the hope that other communities may benefit from our experiences:

1. Community Warning Systems

As Director Ghilarducci notes, the devastation of the 2017 California wildfires highlights the importance of robust, reliable, and effective emergency alert and communications systems. We must develop and implement standardized message formats as well as education and training for both the general public and our local emergency response officials. Most importantly, we need to realize the full potential of all the various warning systems and technologies to ensure we can provide aggressive and compatible emergency communications that meet the needs of our vulnerable populations including those with access and functional needs.

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Emergency alerts and warnings are only effective if they get through. Poorly designed, complex, and unevenly deployed technologies impede the timeliness, accuracy, and effectiveness of warnings. The increasing dependence on wireless and social media systems, means that government – local, state, and federal – must continue to develop tools that can reach people where they really live. While we applaud the FCC’s recent moves to improve the effectiveness of the Wireless Emergency Alert (or ‘WEA’) system, this is but one step needed to advance the ability of residents to receive targeted and truly informative emergency information. Additional work is needed to get telecommunications providers to improve the capabilities of their systems for public information and warning and to protect these critical systems when disasters strike.

As I stated previously, at least 17 of our 24 deaths resulting from the wildfires were of people at least 67 years old. It has been reported that over half of those who perished in the Hurricane Katrina disaster were over the age of 65. Taken together, this should tell us something. I would hope that this would tell FEMA and everybody listening that, as a nation, we need to be doing more to prepare for the evacuation of our older residents when disaster strikes. Additionally, we had at least one other resident die who was wheelchair bound. And during previous disasters in recent years, we know we had great difficulty in convincing some of our homeless population, whose encampments were clearly imperiled by advancing floodwaters, of the need to relocate.

We urge that emergency preparedness plans around the country address the best means for assuring that the elderly, disabled, and homeless be properly evacuated in the event of an emergency. We hope that FEMA will place some emphasis on this and, with FEMA assistance, we would be pleased to develop a plan that might serve as a best practice for others to follow and adapt for their own communities.

Additionally, we know how critically important it is to have effective vegetation management efforts in the wildland-urban interface areas.

2. Disaster Preparedness

As our culture evolves, so too do our expectations of each other and the institutions that serve us. Local governments are on the front line as we directly provide the services and resources that our citizens depend upon. In the area of emergency response, our citizens have come to expect timely fire, law and EMS response via the 911 system. However, as recent disasters have continued to demonstrate, there will be times and occasions when these systems can’t cope with the scope or scale of the demand. We applaud FEMA’s current initiative to help the nation develop a culture of preparedness. Educating our residents and moving them toward actively preparing for disasters such as floods, hurricanes, and wildfires is an area where federal leadership and resources are vital. As the

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direct and indirect costs from ongoing disasters continue to mount higher and higher, now is the time to examine just how much we are willing to spend in effort and treasure before disaster strikes. As Benjamin Franklin famously said “By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.”

In Sonoma County, many residents lost their lives, their homes and their possessions due to the difficulty of warning them of a rapidly approaching and poorly defined threat. Warning others is predicated on understanding the nature of the event that is being faced. Enhancing the ability of first responders to fully grasp a rapidly developing disaster as it unfolds, is critical. The ability to provide “situational awareness” is fundamental to effective early alert and warning efforts. Understanding what is happening is that fundamental first step in deciding what to do about it. In Sonoma County, our 911 system was overwhelmed trying to answer calls from the public and coordinating the initial response – our national 911 system has to expand its capabilities to better support this dual mission. We need better resources to integrate and manage the massive shifts in mobile technology as well as quickly integrate disparate sources of information into a cohesive picture.

3. Disaster Mitigation

I understand that there has been considerable work in both the House and Senate to develop new approaches for disaster management and preparedness. One proposal - referred to as the 6% proposal (putting the equivalent of 6% from the previous year’s disaster impact into predisaster mitigation funding for the current year) is imperative to help our nation move from being reactive to being proactive. One thing that Mark Ghilarducci and Bob Fenton (both with me today) always say is that all Disasters start local and end local. Preparedness fits into that category as well. We must learn from the disasters that have devastated large areas across the nation in the last year as a turning point from which to finally and truly embrace pre-disaster mitigation. We seek your support to help us, at the local level, in order to help you at the federal level. Pre-disaster mitigation funding is essential to implement much needed programs including:

- a. Better addressing the needs of Vulnerable populations – this has to include effective warning systems and practical evacuation planning
- b. More effective vegetative management approaches and practices in the wildland urban interface areas.
- c. Support for a broader and more effective public outreach campaign to help individuals be better prepared in their communities.

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4. Recovery Challenges - Housing

The predominant factor in a community being able to recover from a disaster is directly tied to how quickly the community is able to rebuild. As I mentioned, our community lost over 5200 homes. Fire survivors are facing several significant challenges in their effort to being able to rebuild. First, the vast majority of fire survivors were significantly underinsured. Second, our region simply does not have sufficient numbers of construction workers to rebuild 5,200 houses. Christopher Thornberg with Beacon Economics calculated that Sonoma County would need 17,000 new construction workers to rebuild our houses in one year. Even a three-year rebuild horizon would require 6,000 new construction workers to come into our County. However, we have no place to house them. There is no place for new construction workers to live in our county. In Sonoma County, we were already experiencing a severe housing shortage prior to the fires. Our pre-fire vacancy rate of 1.5% has since diminished further. The fires have exacerbated the housing crisis in Sonoma County.

In addition to the significant challenges faced by burned-out homeowners, there is an additional subset of our local population who have been greatly impacted by the wildfires. These are renters who have been displaced from their homes as landlords have given give them notices to vacate in order to make room for other fire survivors. These renters have no place to go in our community, given our severe housing shortage. Some of them, no doubt, will find themselves living in their cars or on the streets.

It is imperative for our recovery efforts that federal programs be flexible so that we can address our most critical needs at the local level through creative solutions. We greatly appreciate the 90% cost share from FEMA. We, of course, appreciate the supplemental funding offered by Congress to California and to other communities that were so devastated in 2017.

The most important focus now, though one not under the jurisdiction of this Committee, is the HUD CDBG-DR and USDA Emergency Watershed Protection programs. Along with the City of Santa Rosa, our largest city, County seat, and home of so many who have lost their homes, we ask that HUD exercise the authority with which it was provided in the Disaster Supplemental Appropriations bill, and allocate CDBG funds directly to our municipalities. And we ask you as our Legislative branch to not just deploy those monies to the federal agencies, but to also ensure that they administer it according to their intended use while providing us with maximum flexibility. We in Sonoma County and the City of Santa Rosa have experienced significant impacts to our residents and to our local economy, and these programs are vital for us to recover from this disaster and to continue our renewed focus on disaster mitigation to prevent future disasters of this scale.

Testimony of Susan Gorin, 1st District Supervisor, County of Sonoma

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In conclusion, the devastation that Sonoma County experienced will happen again. The contributing factors prompting the firestorm was extreme weather – record low humidity, vegetation by impacted by years of drought, and wind gusts in excess of 75 miles per hour. All of this combined to create the perfect conditions for a true fire storm. With climate change, this extreme weather will increasingly impact communities across our nation. We need to prepare our systems, our responders, and our citizens to face the challenges of this new normal – our new reality.

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.