



# **Impacts of the 2017 Wildfires in the United States**

**Statement of**

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President and Chairman of the Board**

*presented to the*

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
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Good morning, Chairman Barletta, Ranking Member Titus and members of the subcommittee. I am Chief Thomas Jenkins V, fire chief of the Rogers Fire Department in Rogers, Arkansas, and president and chairman of the board of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). The IAFC represents approximately 12,000 leaders of the fire, rescue and emergency services. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the impacts of the 2017 wildland fires in the United States.

The local fire department is an all-hazards response force that must provide:

- fire suppression
- emergency medical response
- hazmat response
- multi-casualty, civil unrest and terrorism response
- urban search and rescue
- train-derailment response
- technical, high-angle, swift-water, building-collapse, confined-space and deep-trench rescue

During times of crisis, the local fire department serves as the closest thing to government that provides service to the victims, their communities, their families and their friends.

The IAFC is concerned by the continuing increase in costs and damages caused by wildland fires across the nation. According to the National Interagency Fire Center, there were 71,499 wildland fires reported across the United States in 2017. These fires burned 10,026,086 acres and a total of 12,306 structures, including 8,065 residences, 4,002 minor structures, 229 commercial structures and 10 mixed commercial-residential structures. By comparison, there were 67,743 wildland fires in 2016, which destroyed 5,509,995 acres. These statistics demonstrate that even if the number of fires remains similar, the damage done by these fires is increasing in severity.<sup>1</sup>

The increasing severity of these fires also affects federal wildland-fire suppression costs. For 2017, the federal government spent a record \$2.9 billion on wildland-fire suppression. By comparison, the average cost of federal wildland-fire suppression operations from 2008 to 2012 was \$1.3 billion. For the following five years, the average annual cost rose to \$2 billion, an approximate 36% increase in costs.<sup>2</sup>

The increasing damage incurred by wildland fires and the escalating cost of suppressing them is caused by several factors, including the growing density and decreasing health of our forests, a hotter and dryer trend in climate and the increase in the number and density of homes built in the wildland-urban interface.

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<sup>1</sup> National Interagency Coordination Center, *Wildland Fire Summary and Statistics: Annual Report: 2017*, p. 7. ([https://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/intelligence/2017\\_statsumm/intro\\_summary17.pdf](https://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/intelligence/2017_statsumm/intro_summary17.pdf)).

<sup>2</sup> National Interagency Coordination Center, *Federal Firefighting Costs (Suppression Only)*, ([https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/fireInfo\\_documents/SuppCosts.pdf](https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/fireInfo_documents/SuppCosts.pdf)).

To address these trends, the IAFC supports the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy. This strategy was developed by federal, state and local partners to address the wildland-fire issue. It promotes three collaborative tenets:

- landscape-scale forest management
- the promotion of fire-adapted communities
- collaborative response to fire in the wildland and wildland-urban interface

To address the national wildland-fire problem and the ensuing damage caused by wildland fire and post-fire floods and landslides, the nation must continue to support collaborative efforts like the Cohesive Strategy. From the perspective of the fire and emergency service, federal, state, tribal/territorial and local partners must focus on promoting greater community-preparedness efforts, effective response and mitigation activities.

### **Community Preparedness**

Communities must take steps to protect themselves and be prepared for the threat of wildland fires. They can set and adopt codes to ensure that residences are built using fire-safe materials and fire-resistant landscapes. Homeowners should ensure that they have cleared brush and vegetation around their homes to create defensible space.

Federal, state, tribal/territorial and local governments must work together to clear hazardous fuels in their communities. To effectively address these and other hazards, localities should adopt community wildfire protection plans (CWPP). These plans help to identify and mitigate wildland-fire risks within communities. They also help to guide hazardous-fuels reduction programs on federal lands and prioritize federal funding for associated projects.

With the assistance of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Forest Service, the IAFC runs the "Ready, Set, Go!" (RSG) Program to help communities prepare and respond to the threat of wildland fires. Using RSG resources, local fire departments assist residents in developing mitigation plans (Ready) and teach them to be situationally aware (Set) and to act early and follow their personal wildland-fire action plans should there be a need to evacuate (Go). Currently, there are 1,803 RSG members in all 50 states.

The RSG Program helps federal, state and local partners collaborate to prepare for wildland fires. For example, the Kittitas County (Washington) Fire District #7 joined RSG in 2012. Over the years, the fire district has worked with The Nature Conservancy, Kittitas County Conservation District, Washington Resource Conservation & Development Council and other partners to form the Kittitas County Fire Adapted Communities Coalition. This collaboration includes fuel reduction/treatment, youth outreach, civic events, homeowner's association outreach, home assessments and door-to-door outreach with smoke alarm installation. In the fall of 2017, the Jolly Mountain Fire threatened 1,500 homes in the district. In response, the fire district held public meetings to distribute RSG materials and help residents prepare for the fires. These efforts were livestreamed on Facebook to reach 700 residents in addition to the more than 50 citizens who attended the meetings in person. The coalition is now working to update the county's CWPP.

The Florida Forest Service (FFS) presents another example of the effectiveness of the RSG program. The FFS took the lead in developing the RSG Program by involving state, county, federal and private-sector partners. The coalition developed a Florida RSG Action Guide to implement the program and created videos, public service announcements and kits for door-to-door outreach to local citizens. The FFS RSG program has also expanded from education to even collaborate on prescribed burns and CWPPs. Due to the FFS' efforts, their RSG program has more than 80 participating fire departments and has given out over 300 RSG kits and 20,000 RSG guides.

Community preparedness is a key component to addressing the wildland-fire issue. By promoting collaboration at the local level, communities can work with federal, state, tribal/territorial and local partners to educate local citizens about the risk of fire and help them take actions to reduce these risks. Community-preparedness programs can also help localities reduce the threat of fire by collaborating on efforts to reduced hazardous fuels and help residents make their homes more fire-safe. Finally, these programs are important in helping local citizens evacuate safely and in a timely manner.

### **Improved Response Capability**

When a wildland fire breaks out, it is important to have an effective response to reduce the potential for loss of life, injury and property damage. Local fire departments—in many cases, volunteer fire departments—provide nearly 80% of the initial attack on wildland fires in the U.S. These fire departments provide wildland fire and emergency protection to 43% of the nation's population, which is an estimated value of \$36 billion per year.<sup>3</sup> In situations where federal land-management agencies are responsible for fire protection on their lands, they rely on local fire departments for initial attack and surge capacity to assist them through mutual-aid agreements. For large fires, fire departments can respond from around the U.S. to assist. For example, 17 states, including North and South Carolina provided assistance to help California respond to the October wildland fires.

In order to ensure an effective response to wildland fires, the IAFC would like to work with the committee and federal agencies, including the USFS and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to improve or build upon existing policies. One key component is the need to have well-vetted qualifications of response staffing and resources. The National Wildfire Coordinating Group's (NWCG) publication, *National Incident Management System: Wildland Fire Qualification System Guide* (NWCG 310-1), establishes minimum requirements for training, physical fitness and experience for wildland-fire positions, which participating agencies have to meet for national mobilization.

The IAFC supports existing efforts for alternate routes to qualification, such as recognition of prior learning and efforts to qualify structural firefighting skills for wildland firefighting duties. In addition, we support FEMA's efforts to improve adoption of NIMS and the Incident Command System by fire departments, emergency medical services and law enforcement

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<sup>3</sup> "Volunteer Fire Assistance: providing a little help to our friends," USDA Forest Service, <https://www.fs.fed.us/fire/partners/vfa/>.

agencies across the U.S. By having universally recognized qualifications and incident command principles, fire resources from various parts of the country will be able to operate together seamlessly on the fireground.

Another area that needs to be addressed is resource ordering and tracking. As an addition to the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), the IAFC developed the Intrastate Mutual Aid System in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to help states create statewide mutual-aid agreements and plans to deploy fire department staffing and equipment in response to major disasters and everyday incidents. To help states manage their resources, the IAFC developed Mutual Aid Net, which 18 states are using today.

As a further evolution, the IAFC has partnered with Intermedix's WebEOC and ESRI's ArcGIS platforms to develop the National Mutual Aid System (NMAS). NMAS will be a tool used to request, locate and deploy resources through all phases of a response. Using NMAS' GIS mapping tools, fire departments will be able to visualize in real-time where resources are and where they need to go and determine response times for decision-making. Beta testing of the NMAS will begin soon in five states: Arizona, California, Florida, Tennessee, and Utah.

One continued challenge to an effective response is the timely and complete reimbursement of fire departments after major wildland fires and other disasters. When a state requests fire-response personnel and resources through the EMAC, local communities send their firefighters and apparatus to respond. These costs are then borne by the communities until they are reimbursed. Sadly, the reimbursement process can take months or even years as the complicated federal/state process unwinds. Local leaders are left facing holes in their budgets and must make difficult spending decisions like cutting budgets, stretching funds or raising taxes to provide the expected level of service to their communities while waiting for final reimbursement. The IAFC requests that FEMA develop a streamlined process for reimbursing states for emergency-response operations and making sure that the states reimburse the local agencies in a timely manner. In addition, we ask that local agencies be made whole for their expenses, including setting a reimbursement rate for volunteer firefighters.

At the Congressional level, the IAFC asks Congress to take action to end the practice of fire borrowing at the USDA Forest Service and U.S. Department of Interior (DOI). Currently, the agencies use a 10-year average to estimate the costs of wildland-fire suppression for the upcoming fiscal year. Unfortunately, as the cost of wildland-fire suppression escalates, these agencies find that their operations are underfunded. They are forced to take funds from forest management, hazardous-fuels reduction and other preparedness programs in order to pay for wildland-fire suppression operations. In September 2017, Secretary Perdue expressed concern that 2017 was the most expensive year on record for wildland-fire suppression costs and that the USDA Forest Service's spending on fire suppression had escalated from 15% to 55% or more of the agency's budget.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture Press Release, "Forest Service Wildland Fire Suppression Costs Exceed \$2 Billion; Secretary Perdue Calls For Congress to Fix "Fire Borrowing" Problem," September 14, 2017, <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2017/09/14/forest-service-wildland-fire-suppression-costs-exceed-2-billion>.

To resolve the fire-borrowing problem, the IAFC recommends that USFS and DOI be able to access the Disaster Relief Allowable Adjustment (Disaster Cap). The Disaster Cap was created by the Budget Control Act of 2011 (P.L. 112-25) to provide a buffer for emergency spending above the mandatory defense and nondefense spending caps without requiring supplemental appropriations. Unfortunately, the Disaster Cap itself is underfunded due to its formula. The Disaster Cap fell from a high of \$18.4 billion in Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 to a low of \$8.1 billion in FY 2017. FEMA projects that the Disaster Cap will fall to \$7.4 billion in FY 2018 and fall again to somewhere between \$6.8 billion and \$7.3 billion in FY 2019. As the costs of all disasters continues to rise, Congress must fix the formula for the Disaster Cap and allow USDA Forest Service and DOI to access it for federal wildland-fire suppression operations.

The IAFC also asks Congress to continue to fund the USDA Forest Service's Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) program. This program provides federal assistance to state foresters to help rural fire departments respond to wildland fires on neighboring federal land. Communities with populations of less than 10,000 can receive training and equipment through the VFA program. The IAFC thanks the House of Representative for supporting \$16 million for the program in FY 2018, an increase over the president's budget request and the Senate's proposed funding level. We urge Congress to adopt the House's funding level for this program.

The IAFC also thanks Congress for reauthorizing the Assistance to Firefighters Grant and the Staffing for Adequate Fire Emergency and Response Grant programs last year. These programs help local fire departments protect their communities from all hazards. Many fire departments respond to wildland fires without adequately training or equipping their firefighters for these specialized operations due to financial constraints. The matching funds provided by the FIRE and SAFER grants help localities better train and equip for wildland fires and help recruit career and volunteer firefighters to staff their efforts. The IAFC urges Congress to fund the AFG and SAFER Grant programs at \$365 million each in FY 2018.

### **Mitigation**

Another important aspect to addressing the wildland-fire problem is mitigation. The IAFC applauds the committee's focus on promoting mitigation to reduce the effects of major disasters. We endorsed the Disaster Recovery Reform Act of 2017 (H.R. 4460). We were glad to see provisions from this legislation included in the recent Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-123), including those that would increase the federal cost share for disasters to 85% if states took steps to adopt building codes and invest in mitigation plans and investments to reduce the risk from all hazards.

The federal, state, tribal/territorial and local governments can take steps to mitigate the risk of wildland fires, including reducing hazardous fuels. Also, communities should adopt building codes and wildland-fire preparedness policies to reduce the threat of fires, especially as more Americans build homes in the wildland-urban interface. As the 2016 tragic fires in Tennessee demonstrated, the wildland-fire problem is not just a Western problem, but something that communities across the nation should identify and take steps to mitigate.

Related to the wildland-fire problem is the risk of flooding and landslides. Wildland fires can scar land and destroy vegetation. When rainstorms follow these fires, the risk of major flooding ensues. For example, Southern California suffered from a major winter storm that impacted areas in Montecito and Carpinteria that had been recently burned by the Thomas Fire. The resulting mudslides and debris flows made national news by killing 22 people and destroying over 100 structures. In March, California is still in the process of trying to clean up over 2 million cubic yards of debris.

The committee has been steadfast in its support of legislation to prevent this tragedy. H.R. 4460 included provisions that would allow states that receive Fire Management Assistance Grants (FMAG) to also receive hazard-mitigation assistance. This assistance would go to the localities affected by the wildland fires and allow them to reseed land, set up erosion barriers and take other actions to mitigate the risk of landslides, floods and future wildland fires. The IAFC appreciates that P.L. 115-123 includes provisions to allow states that received FMAGs in FY 2017 and FY 2018 to receive hazard-mitigation assistance. We look forward to working with the committee to make this program permanent.

### **Conclusion**

I thank the committee today for the opportunity to represent the leadership of the nation's fire and emergency service and discuss the impact of the 2017 wildland fires. The specter of wildland fires now threatens communities across the nation. The IAFC looks forward to working with the committee and our partners at the USDA Forest Service and FEMA to reduce the risk of these fires. We are working to educate local communities about how to prepare for and mitigate the risk of wildland fires. Also, we are working with our federal partners to improve the response to wildland fires through better resource management and deployment in order to reduce their damage. Finally, we look forward to continuing to work with the committee to promote legislation to mitigate the damage these fires and resulting floods and landslides can cause. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.