

STATEMENT OF

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DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND
RELATED AGENCIES

U.S. SENATE

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FEMA'S RESPONSE TO THE 2007 CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES

Good morning Chairwoman Feinstein and members of the Subcommittee. I am Nancy Ward, Regional Administrator for the Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency, and I have served as Regional Administrator for FEMA Region IX since October 2006. Prior to my selection, I served as the Director of Response and Recovery for Region IX. I have worked in various roles in the region for the past seven years.

Before coming to FEMA, I spent more than 20 years in emergency management with the State of California, including six years as chief of the State's disaster assistance programs. In this capacity, I oversaw the implementation of all disaster recovery activities statewide, including recovery activities following the devastating Northridge earthquake of 1994 and the statewide floods of 1995, 07 and 08.

FEMA Region IX includes the states of Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, and American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Guam. Our region encompasses 386,000 square miles with a breadth of more than 8,000 miles. The natural hazards that these states are most challenged by include fires, hurricanes, typhoons and storms causing flooding, damaging winds, landslides, and earthquakes. Along with those natural disasters, Region IX works with our State partners to evaluate readiness and prepare for terrorist events as well.

Since October 20, 2007, the State of California has been affected by a series of wildfires across Southern California. To date, over 3,097 homes were destroyed and over 500,000 acres of land were burned from Santa Barbara County to the U.S.-Mexico border. At the height of the

disaster, 23 active fires were burning in the region. Seven people died as a direct result of the fires and 124 others were injured, including firefighters.

California Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, declared a state of emergency in seven California counties where fires were burning, and on October 24, 2007, 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.

Background

FEMA's primary mission is to reduce the loss of life and property, and to protect the Nation from all hazards, by developing a comprehensive, risk-based, emergency management system of preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation. The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act authorizes the President to issue an emergency or major disaster declaration and triggers direct and financial assistance to individuals, families, State and local governments, and certain nonprofit organizations. The Act also gives FEMA responsibility for coordinating the relief through the combined partnership of 28 Federal agencies and non-governmental organizations.

The 2005 Hurricane Season served as a catalyst for change and reform within FEMA and for our parent agency, the Department of Homeland Security. FEMA is a far more agile, responsive, and pro-active partner with State and local jurisdictions than we were just one year ago. We are proactively working to ensure Federal assistance is delivered as quickly and seamlessly as

possible in coordination with State and local efforts. These changes were evident in the most recent response to the California Wildfires.

Our experience preparing for and responding to the recent wildfires demonstrates the strong working relationship that exists between FEMA and the State of California. Overall, the Federal response to the recent wildfires was organized and effective. In advance of the fire season, experts predicted that dry weather conditions and heavy fuel loads would affect the severity of fires. After receiving the first reports of fire activity several weeks ago, FEMA reached out to State and local governments and other Federal departments and agencies to open a channel of communication that has been maintained throughout the response efforts.

When the fires began, the Federal government moved quickly to support the Governor's requests for assistance. Prior to the President's major disaster declaration on October 24th, FEMA awarded eight Fire Management Assistance Grants (FMAG). FMAGs provide assistance to the State to mitigate, manage, and control fires that threaten such destruction as would constitute a major disaster. Some of the costs these grants cover include:

- Costs for equipment and supplies;
- Emergency protective measures (evacuations and sheltering, police barricading and traffic control, and arson investigation);
- Pre-positioning of resources; and
- Safety items for firefighter health and safety.

In addition, the President issued an emergency declaration on October 23rd for life saving activities to support the State and local authorities in fighting the fires.

The Federal coordination of the California Wildfire response has, in my opinion, been unprecedented in the level of collaboration and cooperation between all partners ó Federal, State, local, and voluntary organizations. On Sunday, October 21st, I personally visited the State's Operations Center along with other FEMA program staff to assist in initiating joint operations. At that time, FEMA simultaneously activated both the Regional Response Coordination Center in Oakland, California, and the National Response Coordination Center in Washington, D.C. All 15 Emergency Support Functions (ESF) were activated at the national level during the response. ESFs are the primary means through which the Federal government provides assistance to State, local, and tribal governments. It is an effective mechanism to group capabilities and resources into the functions that are most likely to be needed during actual incidents where Federal response is required.

By Monday, October 23rd, FEMA was hosting daily video teleconference calls with Federal and State interagency partners and the American Red Cross. That same day, in response to the Governor's request for a major disaster declaration, FEMA began alerting our national response teams and pre-staging resources and commodities at March Air Force Base, the pre-designated Federal staging area in Southern California. By Tuesday, October 24th, the President had issued a major disaster declaration for seven Southern California counties, and designated Mike Hall as the Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) to oversee the disaster operations on the ground. Less than 24 hours after the declaration, an integrated Joint Field Office was established with a Federal response team on-site and many more personnel en route. By being proactive and

anticipating needs before they arose, FEMA was able to move personnel and position supplies to where they would be readily accessible to the areas in need.

At the peak of the State's evacuation efforts, there were 54 shelters open with approximately 22,000 people being housed and several hundred thousand people who self-evacuated. To give you an idea of the scope of the Federal response, FEMA staged more than 79,000 liters of water, 24,000 cots, and 42,000 meals-ready-to-eat in response to the State's request. We also provided 42,000 blankets and other essential items to support sheltering efforts. FEMA's Joint Field Office issued 85 Mission Assignments, totaling over \$30 million, for direct Federal assistance from our partner agencies. In the initial days of the disaster, FEMA's Joint Field Office had staffing levels of over 900 personnel, representing 28 Federal agencies and departments, all unified under the Incident Command System (ICS) structure. FEMA also deployed a National Emergency Response Team, a Federal Incident Response Team, and communications personnel and equipment from its Mobile Emergency Response Support detachment, as well as four Disaster Medical Assistance Teams, elements of the U.S. Coast Guard Deployable Operations Group, and a Defense Coordination Element. At the height of the wildfires, thousands of local, State and Federal fire personnel were in Southern California. Fortunately, there were no firefighter fatalities.

The California Wildfires Recovery Efforts

Even as local, state and federal firefighters continued their efforts to contain and extinguish the fires, the State and Federal governments worked together to develop a Unified State/Federal Recovery Strategy to guide the recovery activities and address the immediate and long-term

needs of individuals, businesses and communities. We recognize that carrying out this strategy will require the same level of cooperation, determination, innovation, creativity and persistence that has characterized the joint response effort. In order to ensure that recovery efforts achieve their objectives, the State of California and FEMA are committed to address each challenge confronted during the recovery period with effective and efficient collaboration. The strategy will serve as the overarching plan guiding an aggressive recovery approach for the individuals and communities affected by the fires and is intended to bring together Federal, State, local and tribal governments, volunteer organizations, the private sector and individuals to ensure that essential services are provided and that recovery challenges are addressed.

Key elements of this State/Federal strategy include:

- ***A Housing Task Force*** to support local governments by identifying short- and long-term housing options and actions that can be taken to help displaced residents find transitional housing.
- ***A Debris Management Task Force*** to help local governments expedite the safe, thorough and timely removal of disaster-related debris.
- ***A Multi-Agency Support Group*** to support local governments by addressing, in an environmentally sensitive manner, flooding, erosion and debris flow concerns.
- ***A Tribal Task Force*** to help affected tribes locate supplemental resources, including personal and public financial assistance.

These task forces have been formed to help the lives of people in Southern California return to normal as quickly as possible. The State of California and FEMA are also committed to providing open and transparent communication, examining all authorities, capabilities and capacities that can be brought to bear to resolve issues.

One of the greatest challenges presented by the scope and scale of catastrophic disasters is the ability to house displaced evacuees. Last week, FEMA released a Joint Housing Task Force Housing Strategy which identifies efforts that support the State and local governments by identifying short and long-term housing options and actions that can be taken to help displaced residents find transitional housing quickly. Again, here is another example of collaboration between our Federal and State partners.

The Joint Housing Task Force is comprised of officials from the California Office of Emergency Services, FEMA, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the American Red Cross, the U.S. Small Business Administration, the U.S. Veterans Administration, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of Interior, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Collectively, these agencies have developed a comprehensive housing plan that includes identifying the most heavily impacted areas, on-the-spot registration of shelter populations, analyzing shelter and mass care operations, transitioning applicants to temporary housing, individual case management for applicants with major damage to their primary residences, identifying available rental resources, assessing and assisting special need populations, and working with local voluntary agencies to identify additional assistance resources. The Task Force's efforts are ongoing and have recently lead to the implementation of a comprehensive housing plan that utilizes all available expertise and resources from the Federal, State, local levels to ensure that assistance efforts are maximized to meet the disaster housing needs of all eligible applicants.

These are just a few examples of the effective collaborative Federal/State response to this disaster. As a former State official and current Regional Administrator for FEMA, I am proud of the State/Federal partnership and the way we have come together to help the victims of this disaster. That said, we still have much work to do and I look forward to continued close collaboration and cooperation with our State, local and tribal partners.

Whether man-made or natural -- whenever an incident occurs, FEMA is committed to establishing a unified command with state emergency management offices, deploying staff, and positioning ourselves as rapidly as possible in response to or in anticipation of disasters and emergencies. We have seen first-hand in the California Wildfire response that we cannot, and should not wait for the State to become overwhelmed prior to offering assistance. By pressing forward in an engaged partnership with our States, FEMA ensures that resource gaps are filled and that the American people get much needed assistance faster. This effort helps us fulfill our mission to reduce the loss of life and property.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.
