

**Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies  
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**Testimony by  
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Chairman, San Diego County Board of Supervisors**

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Senator Feinstein, members of the subcommittee, good morning, and thank you for inviting me to be here today.

It has been five weeks now since the San Diego region was hit by one of the worst firestorms in California history.

It was, as I have said before, ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> Perfect Firestorm. High winds, low humidity, and dry brush . it was a disastrous mixture that took a tremendous toll on our region.

All told, 368,000 acres were charred, upwards of 1700 homes were destroyed, and most tragically, of course, 10 people lost their lives.

Today, we as a region are moving forward: home sites are being cleared of burned-out debris, building permits are being issued, and to the extent it can, a sense of normalcy is returning.

These fires, like the fires that swept through here in 2003, will teach us a great deal. In fact, they already have. The County of San Diego is currently preparing an ~~an~~ <sup>After</sup> Action Report that will tell us what went right, and what didn't.

There are some things, however, that we already know. We know, for example, that the evacuation of more than a half-million San Diego County residents, while not perfect, worked very smoothly. We also know that the timely deployment and use of military aircraft did not . for a variety of reasons.

Since the 2003 fires, the County of San Diego has invested nearly \$130 million to enhance our ability to prevent, prepare for and respond to wildfires: We've purchased two firefighting helicopters; we've spent more than \$20 million to improve our emergency communications system; and nearly \$40 million was spent to remove 417,000 dead, dying and diseased trees . the very fuel that fans wildfires. In fact, we're one of the only counties, if not the only county, to put its own money into this program.

In addition, the County implemented a Reverse 911 system, and just before the fires, we put in place a much more technologically advanced mass notification system, known as Alert San Diego, which is available free of charge to any city in our county. Using a combination of both systems, the County of San Diego made upwards of 415,000 automated calls to issue evacuation, repopulation and boil water orders.

The County of San Diego also holds a strong belief that land use and zoning policies are extremely important to minimizing the loss of life and property.

While evacuation is our preferred method to protecting lives, we also have developed a Shelter-in-Place program. In fact, some of our newer communities will have both Shelter-in-Place programs and clearly-designed evacuation routes.

We have also adopted policies that require defensible spaces around both large and small subdivisions.

In addition, our building codes are already among the strictest in the state. In all new buildings, we require non-combustible roofing, other fire-resistant exterior materials, fire sprinklers, and dual-glazed windows just to mention a few.

As for what can be done better, I strongly believe that the entire process of requesting and deploying military helicopters and tankers needs to be reviewed. While the fires here broke out on Sunday October 21<sup>st</sup>, it wasn't until Wednesday October 24<sup>th</sup> that

our region saw any considerable aerial assistance from the military. By then, most of the damage was already done.

Unfortunately, the process of securing federal assistance takes days and involves several steps: once the local incident commander requests additional support, that request goes to the Joint South Operations Center in Riverside. From there it goes to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. And from there, once it's determined that there are no other civilian resources available, the request goes to the Pentagon. Then, once approved by the Pentagon, aircraft can be deployed, but unfortunately, some of these aircraft are dispatched from other areas of the country like North Carolina, which adds to the time it takes to get these assets into action.

It would seem that these tankers and copters could be pre-positioned ahead of a formal request. Nonetheless, the process for requesting these resources needs to be streamlined.

While on the topic of fire helicopters, the issue of requiring managers, also known as spotters, to be on board military helicopters needs to be resolved yesterday. This is a safety issue, and I certainly understand that. But Calfire, in partnership with the federal government, needs to train and make available enough managers so that no military helicopter capable of fighting fires sits by unused . either at North Island or Miramar or any other base . due to a lack of spotters.

The Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission, which was formed after the 2003 fires, recommended that the state and federal agencies work together to utilize military aerial assets. I am hopeful that this will be done . and soon.

As we look to the future, we must also consider utilizing new technologies that will enable us to fight fires the way we fight wars. This technology could help us greatly when the next fire breaks out, and Senator, perhaps you could assist us in this regard.

For example, San Diego-based SAIC has a monitoring system known as CAMS (Conflagration, Avoidance and Mitigation System). It entails a network of surveillance cameras, that could be installed in the back country, and could help us pinpoint fires within minutes of starting.

In addition, Northrop Grumman has what it calls the Global Hawk . it's an un-manned aircraft that flies at an altitude that is twice that of commercial jet planes. It can see through smoke and survey existing fires, and can determine exactly where the fire is, where it's headed and when it will get there. This information is vital to those calling the shots on the ground, and can greatly improve our ability to spot fires and stop fires before they grow out of control.

Some of this technology was utilized by the military, but not until several days into the fires because it had to be sent in from out of state. Having such a system that is locally-based, either here in San Diego or in Southern California, could be of great help to us.

In the wake of this disaster, I see an opportunity . a tremendous opportunity for our region to become a national leader and model in fire prevention and response. It is my desire, and that of my fellow San Diegans, to see to it that this happens.

Again, thank you for inviting me to be here today.

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