



**STATEMENT OF SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA,
3RD DISTRICT SUPERVISOR, DENNIS HANSBERGER
SENATE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR,
ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES
SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA
TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2007**

Chairwoman Feinstein, Ranking Member Allard, and Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the County of San Bernardino, thank you for inviting me to discuss policy and budget issues related to the fire preparedness, prevention and response activities prior to, during, and after the catastrophic 2007 Southern California wildfires.

Perhaps uniquely, San Bernardino County, by virtue of its geographic location in fire-prone southern California, has had more opportunities to deal with significant wildfires than many other areas. These opportunities, while certainly not welcome, have given us experience that has enabled us to build progressively better and more effective plans for wildfire prevention, preparedness and response; plans that have been proven effective and plans that we have reviewed and revised following each previous event.

A key component to our prevention and preparedness efforts has been the establishment of fuel breaks and thinning of fuels in the San Bernardino National Forest – fuels ravaged by years of drought and devastation by a bark beetle infestation. Our Board of Supervisors established tree removal and brush abatement (slash crew) programs immediately following the 2003 wildfires. These programs provided removal of over 1 million dead, dying and diseased trees, construction of fuel breaks and other fuel modification projects throughout our mountain areas; projects that helped save many communities during these recent by establishing a defensible space which enabled our firefighters to fight these fires effectively and safely.

One dramatic success story has been our slash crew program that constructed fuel breaks and other fuel modification projects to protect residential areas from the rapid spread of fires. Our firefighters specifically credit the work of this crew for preventing the Grass Valley Fire from spreading into Deer Lodge Park, saving

dozens of homes and lives. Of course, we cannot forget the many individual stories of heroic efforts of our firefighters during the early hours of these fires.

We were able to establish these programs because of Congressionally-directed funding provided through the leadership of Senator Feinstein and Congressman Lewis and I am pleased to inform you that these programs literally saved thousands of homes and potential loss of life.

The San Bernardino County Assessor's Office has compiled interesting statistics about the value of property saved by the establishment of fuel breaks and thinning efforts. For example, in the area burned by the Grass Valley Fire – the smaller of our two recent fires – damage is estimated at almost \$90 million. Our Assessor's Office estimates the value of property saved in this fire to be more than \$330 million. The same is true for other areas threatened by these most recent wildfires. We believe this demonstrates the age-old adage that 'an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure'.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of continued funding for this effort; and in particular, adequate funding to maintain our forest into the future.

Our efforts have been enhanced by the formation of the Mountain Area Safety Taskforce (MAST). Originally formed in 2002 to address the bark beetle infestation, MAST is a multi-agency, multi-disciplinary partnership of government and private interests from across our mountain communities that transcend typical jurisdictional boundaries.

MAST consists of federal, state, county and city fire, law enforcement, transportation and other agencies, as well as private interests such as Southern California Edison and area Fire Safe Councils. It is led by our County Administrative Office and meets every other month to plan and monitor tree removal, evacuation readiness and public education programs targeted at maintaining the San Bernardino National Forest as a healthy forest. MAST coordinated the removal of over 1 million dead, dying and diseased trees throughout our forest.

MAST has been an unequivocal success, improving the communications and cooperation among the participating agencies and organizations, resulting in better teamwork and a more effective and efficient response to these types of disasters.

Following the devastating fires in 2003, we implemented a number of new construction standards for those who choose to build in our fire-prone areas. Examples of these standards include:

- Non-combustible, fire-retardant (minimum Class A) roof covering with no organic fiber

- Modified 1-hour fire resistive exterior wall construction when within 15-feet of the property line or less than 30-feet of another building
- Permitting only solid core exterior doors
- Prohibiting eave-type attic and roof-mounted turbine vents and requiring all vents to be covered with 1/8" mesh screen
- Requiring decks be constructed of 1-hour fire resistive and non-combustible materials
- Requiring fuel modification areas
- Restricting residential development to 1 dwelling unit (du) per acre on slopes greater than 30%; 2 du/acre on areas between 15-30% slope; and up to 4 du/acre on areas less than 15% slope

We have also implemented technological changes to enhance our ability to communicate emergency notifications to our residents, businesses and visitors. One such change has been the acquisition of the Telephonic Emergency Notification System (TENS) that permits our first responders to rapidly communicate emergency information regarding impending danger and evacuation orders.

I hope this information helps the Committee understand the policy decisions and financial commitment our entire Board of Supervisors have made toward assuring the safety of our forest communities and demonstrates that we cannot do this alone. Much like our MAST, ensuring a healthy and safe forest requires cooperation and collaboration by all levels of government.

We believe that the combination of construction of fuel breaks, thinning of our forest fuels and enhanced building construction standards has successfully reduced the danger for many of the residents in the San Bernardino National Forest.

In the months ahead, we will review our current policies and, where appropriate, will be proposing changes to continue to make our forest a healthier and safer place.

As you know, the media provides extensive coverage of these significant events, as they should. Our mountain communities rely heavily on tourism, an industry that provides jobs for many of our residents, particularly during the winter months. According to news databases, our mountain resort communities were associated with fire, destruction and devastation in more than 2,500 news stories during the fires. While unintentional, the result of this negative publicity was devastating to our mountain communities after the 2003 fires. This time, our Board of Supervisors has already directed our Economic Development Agency to develop a focused marketing program to counter the negative impacts from media coverage of these fires. While the specific costs for this program remain unknown, our staff has estimated it may be about \$1 million. To date, we have

been unsuccessful in locating any state or federal agencies interested in partnering with us.

I also want to make the Committee aware that some of our mountain residents have expressed a growing concern that insurance companies may cease offering fire insurance policies to homes and businesses in high fire hazard mountain areas.

Perhaps the members of Panel 3 that will address fire recovery issues can assist us by addressing these last two items.

I thank you for your past assistance and look forward to working together to ensure the future of our forest and the safety of our citizens.

I look forward to participating in the discussion of policy and budget issues and responding to any questions members of the Committee may have and again thank you for this opportunity.

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