

**STATEMENT OF  
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
BEFORE  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED  
AGENCIES  
CONCERNING  
FOREST SERVICE PREPARATION FOR AND RESPONSE TO THE 2007  
CALIFORNIA FIRE SEIGE**

**NOVEMBER 27, 2007**

**INTRODUCTION**

Madam Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. This is my &&& trip to California since the Fire Siege of 2007, but my first opportunity to testify on behalf of the Administration on our response to those events. We are proud of our response and grateful for the opportunity to address our efforts.

The 2007 California Fire Siege caused the largest evacuation of people in California history, directly affecting nearly one million people and causing impacts to hundreds of thousands more. In addition, 271 fire starts resulted in 20 large fires which burned over 500,000 acres, destroyed 3,000 structures, and killed ten people. Each of these benchmarks has been surpassed only once in the history of California, and that was during the Fire Siege of 2003. The 2007 California Fire Siege was truly an historic event, but we believe that investments made by the Forest Service and improvements in coordination with other entities resulted in lower overall damage to property and loss of life.

Since these two catastrophic natural disasters occurred within four years each other, they provide two logical anchor points to review size and scope of the events, compare the Federal, State and local response, and determine the effectiveness of investments made since 2003. Our analysis shows that Federal investments and organizational improvements in the aftermath of the 2003 Fire Siege contributed to better safety, better coordination, and less severe outcomes in the 2007 Fire Siege.

**BIG PICTURE: FOREST SERVICE FIRE MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES**

Wildland fire and wildland firefighting are influenced by a complex myriad of factors. These factors include weather, fuel type, terrain, proximity to the wildland urban interface (WUI) and other highly valued landscapes, population density, multiple jurisdictions on the landscape, current weather conditions, and managerial decisions made before and during fire incidents.

The late October conditions in Southern California reflect three key components of fire activity that often cause larger and more expensive fires—historic drought, build up of

fuels on the ground, and the ever increasing reach of development into the wildland urban interface. More specifically, the National Weather Service documented rainfall during the 2006-2007 Southwest California rain season at only 21 percent of normal in downtown Los Angeles, officially the lowest since record keeping began in 1877. Exacerbating these conditions, hot, dry Santa Ana winds came across Southern California, downing power lines and setting off sparks that ignited the 2007 Fire Siege. During the first days of the Siege, 70 mile per hour winds with gusts of over 100 miles per hour were reported, blowing embers over a mile, causing unsafe conditions for aviation resources, and limiting on-the-ground suppression tactics. Much of the forested land where weather conditions occurred was overstocked with highly flammable chaparral understory. The growth and spread of chaparral in the area had been promoted by wet conditions two years ago; yet the subsequent drought ostensibly created a tinderbox of dried flammable wood. The large number of residences in the WUI of Southern California further complicated response to the Fire Siege. 60 percent of new homes constructed in the United States in the 1990s were built in the WUI, a trend evident near the Southern California national forests.

### **HISTORY REPEATING?**

The 2003 Fire Siege demonstrated that the major fire behavior influences of wood, WUI, and weather could converge with catastrophic results. Over 10 days, 14 large fires burned over 730,000 acres, destroyed 5,000 structures and caused 22 fatalities. In the aftermath of the Fire Siege, federal, state and local governmental representatives and elected officials came together to review the events and identify ways to improve coordination and response in the future. The Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission documented their findings and presented recommendations to make California less vulnerable to similar catastrophic fire activity in the future.

The Blue Ribbon Fire Commission report was released in April 2004, and included 33 findings and 58 recommendations relating to Federal, State and local entities. The 19 recommendations pertaining to the Forest Service span a broad range of issues including aviation use, interagency cooperation, fire suppression and preparedness funding, improved community preparedness, and enhanced communication. Progress has been made on all 19 recommendations, resulting in enhanced cooperation and vital firefighting resources, training and intelligence. The Blue Ribbon Commission Stakeholders Ad Hoc Committee met twice in the fall of 2007 to update the status of the original recommendations and establish priorities to complete any outstanding recommendations.

Consistent with the Blue Ribbon Fire Commission recommendations, the Forest Service has invested considerable resources to mitigate the risks of catastrophic wildfires through vegetation treatments, partnership with communities, and education of homeowners.

Forest Service actions after 2003 contributed to improved performance in the following areas during the 2007 Siege, including:

- Better advanced deployment
- Fewer homes and other structures destroyed
- Less fatalities

- No firefighter fatalities
- Fuel treatment areas where, “wildfire laid down”
- More efficient evacuations
- Effective Suppression of 251 of 271 fire starts

### **IMPROVEMENTS IN READINESS**

The Forest Service served two critical roles during the catastrophic fires in Southern California. The task of suppressing fires on National Forest System land was made safer and more successful by investments in hazardous fuels treatments since 2003.

Coordination with other Federal, State, and local agencies to respond to fires on private, State and tribal lands was also improved due to implementation of recommendations from the Blue Ribbon Commission.

In the days before the 2007 Fire Siege, preparedness resources were prepositioned to respond to the threat identified by predictive services, and a severity request was granted to increase initial attack capability. Prepositioning efforts were coordinated with CAL FIRE to maximize capacity. Specifically, the Forest Service increased initial attack engine capability by 30 percent, implemented 24 hour staffing plans on several forests, assigned nine Incident Management Teams (4 Type 1 and 5 Type 2), doubled the number of available helitankers and helicopters, and increased the number of available airtankers from two to eight.

### **INVESTMENTS IN COMMUNITIES SINCE 2003: HAZARDOUS FUELS AND COMMUNITY PLANNING**

Let’s look in more detail at fuels treatments that affected the 2007 Fire Siege. Between 2003 and 2007, the Forest Service, Department of Interior and Natural Resource Conservation Service jointly spent \$300 million on roughly 275,000 acres of vegetative treatments in Southern California. Of those totals, grant programs have provided \$60 million for hazardous fuel reduction and other fire assistance to the State of California, resulting in the treatment of 25,000 acres. These fuel treatments are designed to decrease fire severity, provide evacuation routes, improve effectiveness and expand tactical firefighting options, and ultimately make communities safer.

The 2007 Fire Siege demonstrated the success of recent federal investments in hazardous fuels treatments. Over 40,000 acres of fuel treatment were accomplished on the San Bernardino NF between October 2003 and October 2007. These treatments significantly reduced potential consequences from the fires of October 2007 by:

- providing safe ingress for firefighters and enabling safe evacuation of the public
- slowing fire spread allowing firefighters to contain fire edges more readily
- significantly reducing potential damage to utilities and other infrastructure
- reducing potential ember shower intensity and spotting distance which decreased the number of houses impacted by firebrands
- reducing fire intensity allowing firefighters to more closely engage the fire and protect structures

Specifically, the USFS Tunnel 2 fuel treatment covered almost 250 acres along a ridge southwest of the fire origin. The fire moved into this treatment area at high intensity but fell to mostly a surface fire within the treated area. Although most of the Tunnel 2 treatment area burned, the reduced intensity within it enabled firefighters to contain the fire along roads at its southern perimeter, saving 8,000-10,000 homes in the nearby Crestline area.

Through our State and Volunteer Fire Assistance programs, the Forest Service has provided significant support to California communities to build wildland firefighting capacity. From 2003 to 2007, community grants have totaled over \$8.5 million for equipment, \$3.2 million for Preparedness activities, \$1.8 million for training, and \$1.7 million for Suppression operations and support.

State Fire Assistance funds also go to communities for hazardous fuels planning as well as direct, on-the-ground fuels reduction projects. California has identified 1,264 communities-at-risk from wildfire, and 99 percent of these have completed Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs), or the equivalent. The CWPPs are administered by over 150 Fire Safe Councils in California. Since 2003, the Forest Service has supported these Fire Safe Councils in creating and implementing Community Wildfire Protection Plans with \$31 million in grants.

The Fire Safe Council formed near the Cleveland National Forest after the 2003 Fire Siege illustrates a variety of ways communities can access funds. Assisted by State Fire Assistance grants, the Council developed the Palomar Mountain Community Wildfire Protection Plan, identified needed hazardous fuels treatments, and purchased fire gel for application by homeowners in the event of approaching fire. Some homeowners in the area credit the Forest Service support through State Fire Assistance grants and suppression efforts with saving their homes during the 2007 Fire Siege.

## CONCLUSION

The repositioning efforts, investments in hazardous fuels treatments and community capacity, and coordination between FEMA, CAL FIRE, the California Army National Guard, United State Marine Corps and tribal entities paid off during the 2007 Fire Siege. The 2007 Fire Siege had more fire starts than the 2003 Fire Siege (271 compared to 213) and more large fires that escaped initial attack (20 compared to 14). However, the resulting damage was much less in 2007. Even though the large fires burned one day longer in 2007, the Fire Siege resulted in only 65% as many acres burned, 60% as many structures destroyed, 60% as many firefighter injuries, and 40% as many civilian fatalities. Nearly 13,000 personnel responded to the 2007 Fire Siege, and there was not one firefighter fatality.

Many lessons were learned from the 2003 California Fire Siege. Between 2003 and 2007, coordination was improved between federal, state and local entities; millions of dollars were strategically invested in WUI hazardous fuels treatments; and countless hours were invested in development of Community Wildland Fire Plans. As a result, we

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were better prepared for the events of 2007 in Southern California to deploy resources strategically, successfully and most important, safely. In the midst of a monumental natural disaster, homes and lives were saved as a result of federal investments, improved coordination with local and State entities, and the efforts of the interagency firefighting community.