



STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE

THE

RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY SUBCOMMITTEE
COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, D.C.

*“REAUTHORIZING THE U.S. FIRE ADMINISTRATION AND FIRE GRANT PROGRAMS:
EVALUATING EFFECTIVENESS AND PREPAREDNESS FOR MODERN CHALLENGES.”*

Submitted

By

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Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Stevens, and Members of the Subcommittee: My name is Lori Moore-Merrell, and I serve as the Administrator of the United States Fire Administration (USFA) within the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and discuss the USFA's evolving role within the firefighting and emergency management community.

The USFA's mission is to support and strengthen fire and emergency medical services (EMS) to prevent, mitigate, prepare for, and respond to all hazards. Since 1974, the USFA has led national efforts to reduce the impact of fire and other disasters in our communities through education, building codes and standards, fire safety advocacy, and grants. Yet, there is much work still to be done. As millions of Americans have sadly witnessed firsthand, fire continues to pose a substantial risk across the United States. Fire is a public health and safety problem of great proportions and firefighting remains one of the Nation's most hazardous professions. On average there are more than 1.2 million structure fires, nearly 3,000 deaths, thousands of injuries, and scores of individuals displaced annually due to fires. And although disasters such as fires can affect everyone, we know they can also exacerbate pre-existing challenges in underserved communities across the country. These impacts are further compounded by our changing climate, which is making disasters such as wildfires more common, more intense, and more destructive.

These challenges pose heightened risks to the public and to the first responders who safeguard our communities, and the challenge continues to evolve. Consider that one third of the U.S. population currently lives within the expanding wildland urban interface (WUI) environment. This is not the wildland nor forested areas, rather this refers to communities including neighborhoods, schools, churches, and businesses that are built in cleared but fire-prone lands. These communities must now be protected by local, career and volunteer, structural firefighters. These communities are, unfortunately, often built without adequate attention to WUI building codes or the use of ignition resistant building materials, proper roofing materials, appropriate windows, and vent covers. Further, homeowners in the interface often do not know to maintain defensible space between vegetation and structures. This means when wildfires occur, they increasingly jump to populated areas quickly. For example, the Marshall Fire in Boulder County, Colorado in December 2021 was a rapidly spreading, drought-driven grass fire that burned 1,080 homes. However, despite challenges such as these, only five states and 200 jurisdictions across 24 states have adopted the WUI building codes.

An overlapping challenge facing our communities is that fire departments across the United States, both career and volunteer, are experiencing recruiting and retention challenges and therefore personnel shortages. As previously stated, firefighting is among the most hazardous professions, and both our fire and EMS responders are routinely exposed to incidents involving devastating injuries and tragic loss of life and property. Our first responders face challenges that can have both a physical and psychological impact. Finding ways to support their health and

wellbeing, and bolster recruitment, will be a critical component of our ability to meet evolving challenges. This situation, if not addressed, may diminish first responders' ability to respond to and mitigate emergencies.

Driven by an urgency to meet these risks head-on and save lives, the USFA recently held a National Summit on Fire Prevention and Control in coordination with the leadership of national fire service organizations. Together, we assessed the fire problem including the challenges faced by firefighters in the United States and we formed a national strategy to address the identified challenges facing our nation's fire service. These strategies include:

1. Prepare all firefighters for the climate-driven increase in wildfires in the WUI by providing them with the proper training and equipment.
2. Invest in a national apprenticeship or similar local programs to address the shortage of firefighters and to make the fire service more diverse and inclusive.
3. Establish a comprehensive firefighter cancer strategy that invests in research, provides access to screening for firefighters, and reduces and eliminates PFAS exposure.
4. Provide behavioral health resources and suicide prevention initiatives for all firefighters.
5. Create safer communities by implementing and enforcing codes and standards, especially in the WUI and underserved and vulnerable populations.

The summit was the beginning of a comprehensive and strategic approach to addressing these challenges. Despite our vast technological advances, we must keep pace with an evolving operating environment. For example:

- During a residential fire today, inhabitants have less time to safely exit their burning home than 40 years ago due to a combination of light weight construction, open floor plans, and the likely fuel load of furnishings composed of intensely combustible or flammable materials. And while fire risk is equal opportunity, the reality is that fire deaths, injuries, and displacement disproportionately affect lower income communities and people of color.
- Three out of five home fire deaths happen in properties without smoke alarms or without working smoke alarms. I would like to thank our congressional partners for passing legislation requiring federally subsidized housing units to have hard-wired or tamper resistant smoke alarms.
- Automatic fire suppression systems like sprinklers save lives: Buildings with sprinklers have civilian fire death rates 89 percent lower than those without. Yet, many communities have opted not to require adoption of these life-saving devices.
- Micro-mobility products powered by lithium-ion batteries are causing a new wave of fires in mostly urban and suburban communities throughout the nation.

Challenges such as these, in addition to other factors within the evolving landscape, necessitate that the USFA be at the forefront of efforts to help the firefighting community adapt. One of the ways in which the FEMA helps firefighters and communities to meet these evolving challenges is through its three grant programs designed to enhance the safety of the public and firefighters from fire-related hazards. For example, the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant Program is helping to address personnel shortages across the country. The SAFER Program provides funding directly to fire departments and volunteer firefighter organizations to assist in increasing the number of firefighters to help communities meet industry standards and attain 24-hour staffing to provide adequate fire protection and to fulfill traditional missions of fire departments. Another tool to help the firefighting community meet these evolving challenges is the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program. These grants can be used to enhance a fire department's ability to protect the health and safety of firefighters and the public, as well as the research needed to bolster these efforts. The AFG program also includes the Fire Prevention and Safety (FP&S) Grants, which seek to reduce injury and prevent death among high-risk populations. I would like to thank our congressional partners for their past support of these programs which help to provide the firefighting community with the tools they need to save lives.

As we look to the future, USFA is seeking new ways to address our evolving challenges. An important element of this progression is the USFA's ability to collect, analyze, and report relevant information in a timely manner. Working with the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate, we are redesigning the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) to develop a modern cloud-based data capture system and a streamlined data standard for interoperability and maximum efficiency. The new platform will be known as NERIS (National Emergency Response Information System) and will ensure that USFA and the fire service at-large will have access to secure, interoperable live data services that contain the outputs from the most authoritative sources. These sources include the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, local computer aided dispatch systems, private sector geospatial street data, the U.S. Department of Agriculture fire risk data, FEMA USA structures data, and more. NERIS will provide automated analytics to enable self-service dissemination of summary data and the analytic decision support tools on the Nation's fire challenges to our state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) stakeholders, as well as other interested persons such as those in academic and private sectors. To support this process, USFA staff will ensure the translation and usability of data and complex analyses from the NERIS platform. Data scientists and engineers will be able to leverage the data from this platform to conduct research and disseminate reports to both the fire service and decision makers at all levels of government.

Another way in which USFA is modernizing is by helping the firefighting community prepare for "all hazards" incidents. Emergency medical responses now account for nearly 70 percent of

fire departments' call volume, and firefighter EMTs and paramedics are responding with law enforcement partners to active shooter and hostile events throughout the nation. To help address these challenges, the USFA has established a new EMS branch and a special operations branch to leverage federal and SLTT expertise in threat-based violence and wildfire-related medical needs to prepare training materials for stakeholders and advise policy considerations at all levels.

Additionally, the National Fire Academy (NFA) is increasing its training capacity by bolstering the number of personnel dedicated to delivering WUI awareness and command training for our SLTT partners. This NFA curriculum incorporates training and education for the full spectrum of community risk reduction, and the NFA offers these trainings in multiple media to ensure access for the broadest possible audience. In Fiscal Year 2022, the NFA delivered training on wildfire/interface-related topics to over 96,000 students.

As we look to the challenges ahead, such as those posed by the increasing risks of wildfires and structure fires, USFA looks forward to working with both our firefighting partners and the Members of this Committee to build a more resilient nation. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.