

Opening Statement  
Rep. Phil Gingrey (R-GA)  
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Technology & Innovation  
USFA Reauthorization Hearing

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Good morning Chairman Wu. I want to thank you for holding this hearing today that will begin the process of reauthorizing the United States Fire Administration. The stated mission of USFA is “reduce life and economic losses due to fire and related emergencies, through leadership, advocacy, coordination and support.” This organization provides vital assistance in the areas of training, fire education and awareness and grants to a number of local fire departments across the country. The testimony that our witnesses will provide this morning will help better shape the future priorities of USFA as we work on the agency’s reauthorization, and I look forward to hearing from them on this important matter.

USFA’s training, education, and monitoring activities have made a substantial impact over the last 30 years. Smoke alarms are now standard issue in residences across the country; over a million firefighters have received advanced training from USFA; and firefighter equipment and safety continually improves.

However, while USFA should be proud of its record of achievement, it’s also clear that improvements still can be made. In the last ten years, deaths related to fires have decreased by approximately 25%, from nearly 5,000 in 1996 to 3,675 in 2006. Although that decrease in fire-related deaths is commendable, the United States still has one of the highest death rates from fire in the industrialized world. Additionally, despite decreases in the numbers of fires, direct damage costs are increasing and have topped \$10 billion per year. Put another way, in an average year, fires cause as much damage in the United States as hurricanes.

These statistics highlight the importance of the United States Fire Administration and why we are here today. USFA has a substantial public safety mission whose magnitude is not often recognized.

Therefore, as the Committee begins drafting legislation that will provide a framework for USFA in the coming years, I look to this panel of witnesses to sketch out where the needs are greatest, what programs have been successful to date, and where we currently may be a bit off course.

Before I finish, let me also bring up one particular area of concern for me. Several of our witnesses will discuss potentially updating the National Fire Incident Reporting System or NFIRS (en-firs). I would like to urge caution and diligence in approaching this upgrade. IT projects like this one can rapidly fall apart, potentially leaving USFA with unhappy users and ballooning infrastructure costs. USFA and the fire community need to be very specific about the goals and limitations of a new system. Will web-based reporting bring in better quality data or provide tangible benefits over the current system? How will the upgraded system meet the needs of local, state, and USFA personnel?

These are just a couple of questions that need to be addressed as we begin the process of reauthorizing USFA. I look forward to hearing the testimony of all of our witnesses today. Mr. Chairman, thank you again for convening this hearing to address the future USFA. With that, I yield back.