

Senate Insurance Committee Informational Hearing  
Wildfire Resilience: Innovation in Mitigation  
CAL FIRE Testimony  
March 17, 2022

Good morning Chair Rubio, members of the Committee,

Daniel Berlant, Chief of CAL FIRE's new Community Wildfire Preparedness and Mitigation Division.

Today I will provide the Committee with an overview of CAL FIRE's activities during the 2021 fire season, investments in our fire prevention grants program, and our role in the Safer from Wildfire framework.

The effects of climate change, overgrown forests, and prolonged drought have resulted in unprecedented tree mortality in the state's forests, as well as an increase in the number, size, and severity of wildfires.

It's no secret that these effects have led to year after year significant and record-breaking wildfires. In the past 5 years California has experienced not only the largest wildfires in our recorded history, but the most destructive. Last year, there were nearly 9,000 wildfires across the State that burned over 2.5 million acres. For comparison this is larger than the size of the States of Rhode Island and Delaware put together.

The 2022 wildfire year is well underway. We were fortunate to have seen record rainfall at the end of last year, but our luck seems to have run out as January and February have dried out. Already this year we have responded to over 600 wildfires that have burned nearly 6,000 acres. This includes a nearly 700-acre wildfire along the Coast near Big Sur in January and a 4,000+ acre wildfire just east of Bishop in February.

Despite our recent record-setting fire seasons, CAL FIRE has continued its focus upon increasing the pace and scale of fire prevention activities as a key element in our battle against the destructive and deadly wildfires.

A critical component of our wildfire strategy continues to stress the need to ensure communities are prepared for wildfire by building and retrofitting homes with ember resistant materials, while ensuring homes have defensible space with a minimum of 100-feet clearance from dry vegetation.

Thanks to multi-year funding allocations designated in Senator Dodd's SB 901 from 2018, as well as additional funding allocated by the Legislature in CAL FIRE's budget, California has continued to make significant investments in assisting communities make these mitigations efforts.

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Last Fall we awarded \$138 million in local wildfire prevention grants for fuel reduction, wildfire planning, and public education. Just last month we closed a solicitation period for an additional \$120 million that we plan to award to local community groups later this Spring.

Per AB 38, authored by Assemblymember Wood in 2019, along with our partners at CalOES, we have been busy developing a new Home Hardening retrofit financial assistance program to make sure California's most vulnerable populations get help in hardening their homes against the embers and flames of wildfires.

The 2021-22 Wildfire and Forest Resilience package also augmented CAL FIRE's local Unit's funding with \$50 million for fuel breaks and fuel reduction in and around communities.

California arguably has some of the most stringent wildland building codes in the world.

- Since 2008, new construction in California's high fire risk areas require building materials that are ember-resistant.
- We are constantly reevaluating these requirements and adopting the latest building technologies, standards, and materials.
- From this code we developed a list of low-cost retrofits to provide relatively cheap, and easy upgrades that residents can make to their home to increase its chance of survival. This list is available on our website ReadyForWildfire.org.

As you know, CAL FIRE is responsible for numerous fire prevention programs, and as the State's fire department, we are experts in fire behavior on California's landscape. Over the past year we have worked closely with the Department of Insurance, and various stakeholders to build the Safer from Wildfires framework. Our role has been to provide our expertise and help inform consistent Statewide standards for home and community hardening that will help reduce wildfire risk.

Reducing wildfire risk is a shared focus among the partners and this unified work strengthens risk reduction and preparedness in California communities.

The Safer from Wildfires framework is in line with our requirements, our best practices, as well as the latest science and research.

All the agencies involved have tremendous in-house expertise in various elements of wildfire mitigation.

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We may not be able to prevent all catastrophic wildfires – but having a list of actions that is achievable and effective will help us save lives and protect more homes and businesses.

Sending a unified message to Californians is critical to becoming safer.

The framework works with California's existing wildfire strategy including standards for new development and defensible space.

The measures listed in Safer from Wildfires will be helpful to our firefighters by reducing risk to structures – freeing up resources.

As we prepare for another potentially destructive fire season, it is critical that these wildfire mitigation measures are considered in insurance availability and incentives.

I will conclude with this reminder, don't let the calendar fool you, this is the time of year when we should all be getting our homes, neighborhoods, and communities ready for wildfires. Thank you for your time and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.