

## **Chair, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee—**

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Patrick Butler. I have spent 36 years in the fire service, including 32 years with the Los Angeles Fire Department, where I rose to the rank of Assistant Chief. I currently serve as the Fire Chief and Harbor Master for the City of Redondo Beach.

I have lived in Los Angeles for more than 50 years and raised my family here. This is my home, and I have a direct stake in the safety of this region.

I appear today in my personal and professional capacity to draw on my experience managing large-scale wildfires, to address Los Angeles' failure to properly plan for and execute effective suppression and incident management during the Palisades Fire, and to explain how this disaster departed from long-established wildfire doctrine.

My central finding is unequivocal: **the Palisades Fire was preventable.**

Over my career, I have commanded and operated during some of the largest and most complex wildfires in Los Angeles and Southern California. I have served in command, operations, aviation, and interagency coordination roles during extreme, wind-driven wildland–urban interface fires. This assessment is grounded in executive-level command experience across more than 50 wildfire incidents, including numerous large-scale pre-deployments supported by primary operational records and after-action reports.

In the early hours of January 8, 2025, I responded under mutual aid to the Palisades Fire. What I observed was not simply a difficult fire under extreme conditions. It was the predictable outcome of a breakdown in leadership, preparedness, and command discipline.

Firefighters were forced to improvise without adequate resources, unified command, or consistent safety oversight. This was not a failure of effort by firefighters. **It was a failure of leadership above them.**

The fire that began on January 1, known as the Lachman Fire, was never fully extinguished. It became a holdover fire—a well-known and predictable hazard in chaparral environments such as the Pacific Palisades. In my experience, when holdover fires are not aggressively extinguished and continuously monitored, they rekindle. This is not rare. It is expected.

When the forecasted life-threatening winds arrived on January 7, the unmonitored Lachman Fire predictably re-ignited and spread rapidly. What followed was not unforeseeable. It was the expected result of leaving a holdover fire unmanaged in a densely populated, high-risk community with limited evacuation routes.

Los Angeles possesses decades of wildfire experience, established pre-deployment doctrine, and area-specific operational plans for every major wildland–urban interface corridor, including the Pacific Palisades. These plans were written, trained, exercised, and repeatedly proven effective. I

was directly involved in their development and personally executed them during prior wind-driven fires in these same communities.

For more than a week before this fire, the National Weather Service issued repeated warnings of a life-threatening wind event. Fire-weather intelligence clearly identified the Pacific Palisades and the still-smoldering Lachman Fire within the projected impact area. The failure was not a lack of warning. **It was a failure to act.**

In incidents I previously commanded, forecasts of this severity triggered immediate escalation—large-scale pre-deployment, extended staffing, and full activation of emergency management systems. Forecasts were treated as operational decision points, not background information. That did not occur here.

Once a fire becomes fully wind-driven, outcomes are largely determined by what leaders did, or failed to do, before the wind arrived. That decision window existed in this case. It was missed.

These failures extend beyond the fire department. During the critical preparedness period, the mayor was out of the country despite knowledge of the forecasted life-threatening conditions. Responsibility for continuity of leadership and citywide coordination rests with the mayor, and in this case, that responsibility was not met.

After the fire, internal after-action findings were altered despite documented objections from an independent review team composed of experienced, highly respected firefighters. Critical observations were removed or softened, and failures were reframed. After-action reviews exist to establish the truth and prevent recurrence. When they are shaped to protect reputations or manage narrative, future lives are put at risk.

The firefighters on the ground performed with courage and professionalism under impossible conditions. Some lost their own homes while continuing to defend others. They did not fail the public. They were failed by a system that did not adequately prepare or lead them.

Based on my experience, the Palisades Fire was not an inevitable natural disaster. It was a preventable event shaped by decisions made before the wind arrived.

When leaders act early on known risk, disasters are prevented. When leaders delay, defer, or minimize risk, disasters are manufactured. The Palisades Fire was not caused by weather alone, it was caused by leadership decisions.

Only independent Congressional oversight can fully examine these failures and ensure public-safety decisions are driven by risk and responsibility rather than politics.

Thank you. I am prepared to answer your questions.

# The Palisades Fire a Preventable Disaster:

A Written Report on the Palisades Fire Response

## Prepared by:

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## Introduction

I appear today at the request of the United States Senate to offer my experience managing large scale wildfires and to speak to Los Angeles' failures to properly plan for and execute effective suppression and management of the Palisades Fire.

I prepared this report to evaluate whether Los Angeles Fire Department and Los Angeles City leadership actions aligned with long-established wildfire preparedness doctrine in Los Angeles.

**The central finding is unequivocal: the Palisades Fire was preventable.** The outcome was determined before ignition and well before the onset of extreme winds. Los Angeles possesses decades of wildfire experience, established doctrine, pre-deployment policies, and specific, well-documented operational plans for the Pacific Palisades and other high-risk areas designed to prevent small fires from escalating into wind-driven disasters. Those plans and policies were in place. They were not executed.

In the days leading up to the fire, the risk environment was well understood. Life-threatening fire-weather forecasts and Red Flag warnings were issued ten days in advance, and the Pacific Palisades' vulnerabilities, steep terrain, dense vegetation, limited ingress and egress, evacuation constraints, and a documented wildfire history, were long recognized.

Compounding these risks was the presence of a recent still smoldering fire in the same corridor, creating a foreseeable ignition threat under the forecasted life-threatening wind conditions. Under established wildfire doctrine, such conditions require early and mandatory escalation, including aggressive extinguishment and continuous monitoring of prior fires, advance resource pre-deployment, staffing augmentation, early activation of incident management teams and logistics, verification of infrastructure readiness, and coordinated, whole-of-government preparedness.

Those measures were not implemented at a level commensurate with the forecasted threat. Once the Palisades Fire became wind-driven, rapid containment was no longer realistic. At that point, outcomes were no longer shaped by the heroics of firefighters on the frontlines but determined by what fire department and city leadership did, or failed to do, before the wind arrived. That window existed here. It was missed.

## Author Qualifications and Basis for Analysis

I have 36 years of experience in the fire service, including 32 years with the Los Angeles Fire Department, where I rose to the rank of Assistant Chief. I have lived in Los Angeles for more than 50 years and raised my family here. This is my home, and I have a direct and personal stake in its safety.

During my career with the Los Angeles Fire Department, my responsibilities included command of large-scale wildfires, emergency operations, aviation, interagency coordination, and executive-level decision-making during extreme fire weather events and other high-consequence emergencies throughout Los Angeles and Southern California.

I have served as Incident Commander during multiple wind-driven wildfires, including in the Pacific Palisades and other Wildland–Urban Interface communities, and have commanded complex, high-risk incidents. I have ordered large-scale pre-deployment of resources, extended staffing, early activation of incident management teams, and sustained post-extinguishment monitoring based on forecasted risk.

This report is grounded in my decades of executive-level command experience across more than 50 wildfire incidents, including direct command of five major Los Angeles wildfires over the past decade. Those incidents resulted in the evacuation of more than 100,000 residents, burned over 18,000 acres, and caused the loss of more than 40 structures, without a single fire-related civilian fatality.<sup>1234</sup>

These outcomes were achieved through the disciplined execution of established and repeatedly validated operational plans, led by frontline firefighters and supported by a fully engaged, whole-of-government response. Collectively, these operations protected hundreds of thousands of residents, prevented the loss of tens of thousands of homes and businesses, limited economic disruption, and preserved critical watersheds and public infrastructure.

They were not without failure, and their success depended on a culture of accountability in which leaders and team members were required to identify shortcomings, challenge poor decisions, and speak up when risk was being mismanaged, with the clear understanding that command carries a non-delegable duty of care and that failure to meet that duty carries professional consequences, including removal from command.

My experience also includes more than 30 large-scale pre-deployments, supported by primary operational records and after-action reports. I have co-authored internationally recognized manuals on wildfire strategy, tactics, and operational best practices.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/2017/12/6/skirball-fire/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/2019/10/10/saddle-ridge-fire>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/2019/10/28/getty-fire/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/2017/9/1/la-tuna-fire>

This assessment is further informed by my direct, first-hand observation of the Palisades Fire while operating under mutual aid beginning in the early morning hours of January 8, 2025, and is not based on retrospective commentary.

I retain decades of operational documentation and internal department communications demonstrating how similar risk scenarios were successfully managed in the past, including specific wildfire response plans for the Pacific Palisades.

## **The Wildland–Urban Interface (WUI) Risk Environment**

Wildfires are categorized primarily by fuel involvement, fire behavior, and environment, not by cause alone. A Wildland–Urban Interface (WUI) fire is a wildfire fire that originates in or spreads into areas where vegetation and human development intermingle, allowing structures, infrastructure, and other built assets to become part of the fuel complex.

Los Angeles contains one of the most complex and hazardous Wildland–Urban Interface (WUI) environments in the world, due to the convergence of steep topography, extreme wind regimes, continuous fuels, and hillside development.

*For the purposes of this report, “wildfire” is used as an umbrella term encompassing all wildland fires, including those involving the Wildland–Urban Interface.*

## **Known Risk Environment & Ignition Sources**

The City of Los Angeles spans nearly 470 square miles and serves close to four million residents, with more than 200 square miles of brush and mountainous terrain designated as high wildfire risk. Hundreds of thousands of residents live in Wildland–Urban Interface communities where steep terrain, dense fuels, limited access, and evacuation constraints amplify danger during wind-driven fires.

Wildfire is the single greatest threat to public safety in these areas. As a result, the Los Angeles Fire Department has historically been at the forefront of urban wildfire fire preparedness, planning, training and response. In my 32 years in the Los Angeles Fire Department, this responsibility was never optional. It was fully institutionalized, embedded in doctrine, training, staffing models, lessons learned, and command decision-making. Departures from it were understood to carry consequences.

Pacific Palisades is a residential community on the west side of the City of Los Angeles, home to tens of thousands of residents and characterized by a unique convergence of dense hillside neighborhoods, coastal development, and open wildland. The community sits at the edge of the Santa Monica Mountains, a state parkland managed by California State Parks.

The area has a well-documented history of wildfire activity. Steep terrain, dense chaparral vegetation, limited access routes, and evacuation constraints have been identified in multiple after-action reports following prior fires in the same area. During wind events, these conditions

can influence fire behavior and compress response timelines, underscoring the importance of timely advance planning and preparedness.

Most wildfires are caused by human activity, including equipment use, electrical infrastructure failures, open flames, and discarded smoking materials, some accidental, some negligent, while natural causes account for a much smaller share. Arson represents only a small fraction of wildfire ignitions.

### **Homelessness as a Predictable Ignition and Operational Risk**

According to a fire department staff report written in March of 2025<sup>5</sup>, approximately one-third of all fires in Los Angeles is associated with homelessness. These conditions create predictable ignition and wildfire risk, particularly in Wildland–Urban Interface corridors, watersheds, and critical infrastructure areas. Los Angeles’ growing homeless population has significantly increased demand on the Los Angeles Fire Department. Since 2018, the homeless population has grown by 44.6 percent, while LAFD call volume has increased by 13.6 percent, highlighting the expanding impact of homelessness on public-safety operations. In each of the past four years, total funding allocated to homelessness has exceeded the Los Angeles Fire Department’s entire operating budget by approximately \$1 billion, while calls for service related to homelessness have increased by approximately 475 percent.

This adds an additional layer of preparedness complexity. Homeless encampments are commonly located in brush areas, canyons, river channels, freeway embankments, and utility corridors, including the Santa Monica Mountains, where continuous fuels, steep terrain, and limited access allow routine ignition sources to rapidly escalate, particularly during Red Flag and Santa Ana wind events.

The threat and its consequences are real and recurring. Fires originating from human activity, including homeless encampments, have repeatedly escalated into significant wildfire incidents in Los Angeles. In 2019, I commanded a wildfire that burned approximately 400 acres, destroyed six homes, and was attributed to an ignition originating from a homeless encampment, demonstrating how routine ignition sources, when combined with known fuels, terrain, and wind conditions, can rapidly become destructive wildfires.

### **Point of Origin – The Lachman Fire**

Holdover fires, fires that are not fully extinguished and later rekindle, are a well-known and predictable risk in brush environments. Throughout my career, I have treated holdover fires in high-risk areas as active threats whenever adverse weather is forecast. Under those conditions, standard practice requires aggressive extinguishment, continuous monitoring, extended staffing, and heightened readiness until the risk has passed.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://ens.lacity.org/lafd/lafdreport/lafdlafdreport1864188996\\_05202025.pdf](https://ens.lacity.org/lafd/lafdreport/lafdlafdreport1864188996_05202025.pdf)

When holdover fires are not fully extinguished and continuously monitored, they rekindle. I have seen this pattern repeatedly over my career. It is not rare or unusual; it is a foreseeable and preventable outcome when known risk is left unmanaged.

According to department records<sup>6</sup>, the Lachman Fire ignited shortly after midnight on January 1, 2025, along a ridgeline near the Pacific Palisades. The fire was contained at approximately eight acres by the morning hours, with resources remaining assigned to the incident for approximately 12 additional hours before leaving the scene.

The Lachman Fire was never fully extinguished and continued to smolder as a holdover fire without sustained monitoring<sup>7</sup>. When the forecasted winds arrived four days later, the Lachman Fire predictably rekindled and spread rapidly, becoming what is now known as the Palisades Fire.

## **Decades of Established Training and Operational Planning for the Pacific Palisades**

For decades, Pacific Palisades has been the subject of detailed, scenario-specific wildfire planning by the Los Angeles Fire Department and allied agencies. This planning did not exist in theory alone; it was formalized through written operational plans, pre-incident strategies, evacuation models, infrastructure hardening priorities, and tactical response playbooks tailored specifically to the Pacific Palisades' unique risk profile.

All Los Angeles Fire Department leaders are required to complete the national standard course on Intermediate Wildland Fire Behavior<sup>8</sup>, which teaches that successful suppression depends on early recognition and timely escalation, not delayed reaction when fire conditions worsen.

Throughout my career, wildfire operations, pre-deployment measures and wildfire strategy and tactics have been a core competency evaluated in every promotional written examination and oral board I have taken, and that expectation remains unchanged today.

These operational plans addressed, in detail, the very vulnerabilities present during the January fire: limited ingress and egress, choke points, delayed evacuation timelines, water-supply and pressure constraints at elevation, the need for early aviation use, pre-positioning of fire engines, and sustained extinguishment operations to prevent holdover fires during forecasted wind events. They also contemplated worst-case Santa Ana wind<sup>9</sup> scenarios and explicitly recognized that once winds reached critical thresholds, suppression options would narrow rapidly, shifting the focus to life safety and structure defense.

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<sup>6</sup> [https://ens.lacity.org/lafd/lafdreport/lafdlafdreport1864192431\\_10212025.pdf](https://ens.lacity.org/lafd/lafdreport/lafdlafdreport1864192431_10212025.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://lamag.com/environment/wildfires/one-year-later-newly-appointed-lafd-chief-acknowledges-failures/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nwcg.gov/node/37704>

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa\\_Ana\\_winds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Ana_winds)

I know these plans well. Pacific Palisades-specific response plans were reviewed department-wide, practiced year after year, and applied repeatedly throughout my career. They were developed from hard lessons learned during earlier fires in the same area and were specifically designed to prevent a small fire, or a holdover fire, from escalating into a fast-moving, wind-driven disaster. I have personally implemented these plans, in command roles, during prior wildfires in the Pacific Palisades.

The existence of these plans is not in dispute. What is at issue is that the known strategies, infrastructure assumptions, evacuation considerations, and tactical triggers embedded in those plans were not meaningfully implemented in the days leading up to January 7, despite clear and escalating risk indicators. This was not a failure of knowledge. It was a failure of leadership, initiative, and execution.

## **Weather Intelligence and Advance Warning**

On December 27, 2024, ten days before the Palisades Fire, the National Weather Service issued repeated warnings of an impending, life-threatening wind event. These warnings were not general advisories; they included detailed forecasts identifying extreme fire-weather conditions and were accompanied by formal briefings to fire departments and city emergency leadership. The risk was clearly communicated, well in advance, and widely understood within the emergency-management community. The failure was not a lack of warning, but a failure to act on it. Fire-weather maps clearly identified the Pacific Palisades as being directly within the projected impact area, including the location of the still-smoldering Lachman Fire.

In incidents I previously commanded, forecasts of this severity triggered immediate and mandatory escalation of preparedness measures, pre-deployments, and activating the full force of government well before conditions deteriorated. Forecasts were treated as operational decision points, not background information. In this case, the warning was clear, and the opportunity to act was missed.

## **Preparedness and Citywide Coordination**

In my past incidents, this meant bringing executive leadership together, including the City Emergency Operations Board chaired by the mayor, aligning city departments, coordinating public messaging, activating the emergency operations center to the highest level and making sure critical systems, especially water supply, staffing, and access, were ready to function under emergency conditions.

In the lead-up to the Palisades Fire, I did not observe evidence of a coordinated, whole-of-government preparedness effort commensurate with the forecasted risk. Preparedness actions appeared fragmented and largely confined within departmental silos. As a result, known vulnerabilities, such as evacuation complexity, infrastructure reliability<sup>10</sup>, water systems, and staffing surge capacity, were not sufficiently mitigated before conditions deteriorated. These

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<sup>10</sup> <https://abc7.com/post/palisades-fire-lafd-chief-kristin-crowley-defends-pre-deployment-decisions-prior-blaze/15804268/#>



conclusions are not based solely on my personal observations. They are corroborated by public records, official statements, and after-incident acknowledgments by fire department leadership, which confirmed that large-scale pre-deployment, extended staffing, and coordinated preparedness actions were not implemented at any meaningful level in advance of the wind event.<sup>11</sup>

Even while the fire remained uncontrolled, fire department leadership publicly characterized their deployment decisions as appropriate for the known risk and asserted that resources were deployed above and beyond normal levels<sup>12</sup>. In my professional assessment, that characterization reflects a failure to recognize the severity of the conditions and a misunderstanding of established wildfire preparedness doctrine that has repeatedly proven effective in Los Angeles.

## **Mayoral Leadership and Continuity of Government**

Mayoral leadership is central to emergency preparedness. It sets priorities, ensures continuity of command, and activates emergency governance structures during predictable high-risk events. In my experience, when executive leadership is engaged, coordination improves, authority is clear, and operational readiness increases.

During the period leading up to the Palisades Fire, the mayor was out of the country despite knowledge of the forecasted life-threatening wind event. Emergency leadership should not pause for travel. The responsibility and accountability for preparedness, continuity of command, and executive oversight rests squarely with the mayor, and that responsibility was not met.<sup>13 14</sup>

By contrast, during prior incidents such as the 2019 Skirball Fire, where I served as Incident Commander, active mayoral engagement ensured full government alignment and support, strengthening coordination and reinforcing early operational decisions.

## **Maximum Commitment Plan - Policy on Disaster Triage**

During the Palisades Fire, department leadership stated that only limited resources could be committed to the Palisades Fire because the department also had to continue handling routine 911 calls<sup>15</sup>. Framed this way, the explanation implies that routine call volume constrained the department's ability to escalate its response. In my professional judgment, that framing is

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<sup>11</sup> <https://laist.com/news/climate-environment/lafd-chief-palisades-interview>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-01-14/firefighters-lafd-response-lack-of-staff-engines-pacific-palisades-fire>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-12-17/both-sides-botched-it-bass-rips-responses-to-palisades-eaton-fires>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/21/us/la-wildfires-mayor-karen-bass.html>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-01-18/amid-dangerous-winds-in-2011-lafd-engines-stood-ready-in-the-palisades-that-didnt-happen-this-time>

misleading. Large-scale disasters are not managed by preserving normal response standards everywhere while a catastrophic event unfolds. Departmental doctrine explicitly anticipates continued citywide call demand during extreme events and provides a structured mechanism, the Maximum Commitment Plan, to manage that reality.

Under this policy the department is not required to respond to every call at normal speed or with normal resource levels during a major incident. Leadership is expected to triage. Lower-priority calls may be delayed, downgraded, or in some cases do not receive a response at all so that resources can be concentrated where the threat to life is greatest. The policy exists to allow nearly half of the department's daily frontline resources to be surged toward a life-threatening disaster like the Palisades Fire

The framework is simple. Managing a fire department during a major wildfire is like running a hospital during a mass-casualty event. Normal operations stop. On duty staff are held over, off-duty staff are recalled, elective care is canceled, non-critical cases are deferred, and limited resources are triaged to those most likely to survive. This is the unavoidable reality of true crisis management. Fire departments operate the same way during disasters: the goal is not to maintain normal service everywhere, but to concentrate limited resources where they will save the most lives.

I have been directly involved in this decision-making process at the Department Operations Center during large-scale wildfires and other major disasters. In those incidents, continued citywide call volume was fully anticipated and did not prevent escalation; it reinforced the need for early, decisive activation of maximum commitment. That experience informs my assessment of the Palisades Fire. The conditions present were well within the scope of incidents for which this policy was designed. What was missing was not authority, policy, or precedent, but the failure to recognize that the moment to fully employ those tools had arrived.

## **Palisades Fire - A Clear Departure from Proven Pre-Deployment Practice**

The effectiveness of early pre-deployment is well established in Los Angeles and has been repeatedly demonstrated across major wildfire incidents. Over the course of my career, I personally ordered large-scale pre-deployment actions more than 30 times in advance of forecasted extreme fire weather.

Long-standing wildfire doctrine within the Los Angeles Fire Department calls for early and aggressive pre-deployment when extreme fire weather is forecast. This doctrine includes holding over on-duty crews, recalling off-duty personnel, augmenting staffing, deploying community fire patrols, placing mechanical and logistical support on standby, and activating incident management teams before ignition or escalation. These measures are preventative by design. Their purpose is to place resources where they are most likely to be needed before wind, terrain, or fire behavior restrict mobility and narrow operational options. When implemented early, they reduce response times, strengthen initial attack, and protect at-risk communities.

In the case of the Palisades Fire, these pre-deployment measures were not implemented at a level consistent with the forecasted risk. Staffing was not meaningfully increased, and resources were not saturated into the highest-risk community despite well-documented terrain constraints, access limitations, and the presence of the still smoldering Lachman Fire. Department records indicate that approximately nine fire engines and 60 firefighters were pre-deployed in advance of the forecasted event and that no pre-deployment occurred within the Pacific Palisades itself.

Despite operating under conditions that historically triggered large-scale pre-deployment, the Palisades Fire response was augmented at less than half of the firefighter staffing levels typically employed in comparable incidents. These figures demonstrate that the response was not merely scaled differently, it was substantially under-augmented relative to known risk and established precedent.

Fire department leadership and other officials asserted that a lack of immediate funding prevented pre-deployment and other preventive actions despite a clearly identified risk. Claims of inadequate funding are the standard response to government inaction in the face of known, immediate, and foreseeable hazards. They do not explain failure; they document it.<sup>16</sup>

## **Methodology: Comparative Case Studies – Pre-Deployment**

This analysis uses comparative case studies to evaluate pre-deployment decisions during the Palisades Fire relative to other wildfire incidents with comparable forecasted conditions. Incidents were selected based on similarity in predicted wind events, fire weather warnings, fuel conditions, and wildland–urban interface exposure.

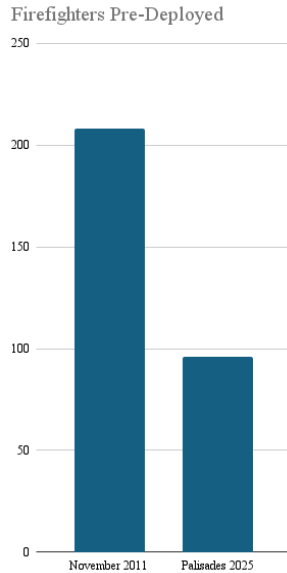
The bar charts below compare resource pre-deployment levels, including engines, personnel, and specialized units, ordered or positioned in advance of ignition or anticipated escalation. Data were drawn from official operational records, deployment logs, and after-action documentation.

This comparative approach is intended to assess whether established pre-deployment practices were applied consistently under similar risk indicators, and to identify deviations between forecasted risk and operational readiness.

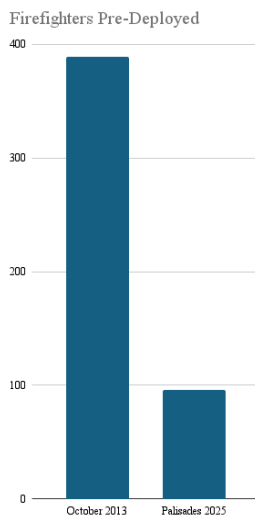
**In November 2011**, after the National Weather Service forecast Santa Ana winds approaching 90 miles per hour, my command team and I implemented early pre-deployment measures, positioning more than 50 fire engines and over 200 firefighters in high-risk communities across the city, including the Pacific Palisades. After three days of extreme wind conditions, two wildfires ignited. Both were quickly contained because resources were already in place and crews were operating from a posture of readiness.

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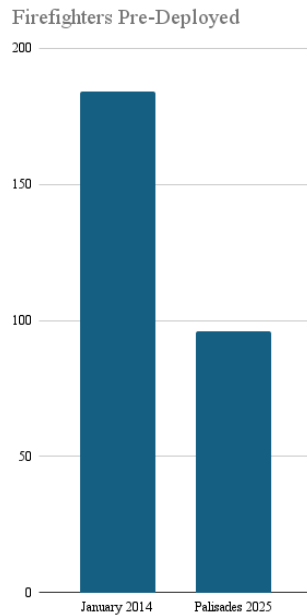
<sup>16</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-01-11/l-a-fire-chief-raises-alarm-over-funding-saying-the-city-failed-her-agency>



**In October 2013**, following an urgent Extreme Fire Weather warning, our team recalled off-duty personnel, held over outgoing shifts, and placed approximately 1,000 additional firefighters on duty, staffing more than 50 extra fire engines beyond normal daily levels. After three days of severe Santa Ana winds, no major wildfires occurred.



**In January 2014**, following an urgent Extreme Fire Weather warning, fire department leadership pre-deployed 40 fire engines and 106 firefighters including resources into the Pacific Palisades. At 3PM a wildfire ignited in the Pacific Palisades along Pacific Coast Highway. The fire was initially reported at roughly a quarter acre, firefighters arrived on scene within six minutes, and the fire was contained to approximately 10 acres, with no homes lost.



The Palisades Fire response represented a clear departure from established preparedness practices, even though forecasted risk indicators matched or exceeded prior events and sufficient resources were available.

## Community Preparedness – Public Trust

For decades, the Pacific Palisades community has actively prepared for wildfire risk in partnership with the Los Angeles Fire Department and city leadership. Residents participated in evacuation planning, community drills, brush-clearance programs, neighborhood preparedness training, and repeated town halls focused on wildfire scenarios specific to the Palisades and West Los Angeles.

I personally led and participated in multiple community meetings in the Pacific Palisades and other hillside communities throughout West Los Angeles, directly addressing residents on wildfire risk, preparedness, and evacuation planning, where residents were briefed on fire behavior, evacuation timing, access constraints, and the importance of early action during forecasted wind events. The community listened, trained, and did its part. They prepared based on the plans and expectations set by the city.

The failure in the Palisades Fire was not a lack of community engagement or awareness. It was a breakdown at the city level. When the moment came to act on known risk, city leadership did not match the level of preparation and commitment the community had been asked to make. The public upheld its responsibility. The city did not.

## Public Information - Narrative Control

Public messaging is a critical operational tool in wildfire preparedness and response, not a public-relations exercise. Before a wildfire, messaging should be driven by forecasted risk and used to prepare the public for early action, including evacuation before fire is visible. Clear, repeated, plain-language communication helps normalize disruption, improves evacuation compliance, and preserves access for responders. When leaders communicate early and honestly about risk, communities are more likely to act decisively and safely.

During a wildfire, public messaging must prioritize life safety, accuracy, and consistency across agencies. Messages should clearly distinguish evacuation orders from warnings, explain why action is required, and acknowledge that conditions can change rapidly. After the incident, transparent communication about what worked, what failed, and what will change is essential to maintaining public trust. Messaging that aligns with operational reality supports response objectives and reduces harm; messaging used to manage perception undermines safety and increases the likelihood of repeated failure. In every wildfire incident that I have commanded I leveraged the media and public messaging as another tool to communicate risk and support fire department operations<sup>17</sup>.

During and after the Palisades Fire, city leadership redirected public messaging away from documented operational failures and toward a narrative intended to manage media reaction. This was not a communications lapse; it was a deliberate effort to deflect accountability. Even while the fire remained active and communities were still at extreme risk, fire department leadership and local labor leaders engaged in media interviews<sup>18</sup> emphasizing funding grievances and unrelated political issues, diverting attention from operational decision-making and the immediate public-safety emergency.

Official statements emphasized inevitability, extreme weather, and firefighter heroism while minimizing or omitting leadership decisions, preparedness failures, infrastructure weaknesses, and missed escalation triggers that occurred before ignition. This reframing distorted the public record and obstructed honest evaluation of what went wrong.

When leaders choose narrative control over factual transparency, public trust is sacrificed, and institutional failure is reinforced. This conduct undermines after-action review integrity, delays reform and ensures that the same preventable failures will recur under the next forecasted emergency.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/21/us/california-palisades-fire>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2025/01/10/us/video/the-lead-kristin-crowley-california-fire-department-lafd-wildfires-budget-jake-tapper>

## **Budget and Priorities: The Cost of Deferred Readiness**

Public safety is not one priority among many; it is the foundational responsibility of city government and the mayor. The events surrounding the Palisades Fire must be understood within that broader fiscal and policy context.

In the year leading up to this fire, budgetary and policy decisions made by the mayor and city leadership deferred critical infrastructure maintenance, including water systems, reservoirs, and supporting utilities, while constraining overtime, limiting extended staffing, reducing operational flexibility, and leaving essential fire apparatus out of service. Taken together, these decisions steadily eroded surge capacity and weakened the city's ability to respond to predictable, high-risk wildfire conditions<sup>19</sup>.

I have seen this pattern repeatedly. When readiness investments are deferred and staffing models are constrained, the operational impacts are foreseeable and repeatable: slower response times, fewer resources on the ground, diminished coordination, and increased risk to firefighters and the public.

## **The Role of the State**

The Palisades Fire cannot be understood as a local failure alone. The State of California plays a direct and consequential role in wildfire prevention, preparedness, and response through land-use policy, vegetation management, utility regulation, mutual-aid coordination, and funding priorities. State-owned and state-managed lands surround and interface with the Pacific Palisades, yet fuel conditions in these areas have remained inadequately treated for years despite repeated warnings and prior fires. The risk created by those conditions was well known and well documented. I have commanded wildfires where these policies directly limited suppression options and increased risk to firefighters and the public.

## **Leadership Development and Appointments**

The deficiencies observed during the Palisades Fire did not arise in isolation. They reflect leadership choices that often placed political considerations ahead of operational readiness. Emergency response failures are rarely sudden; they are the predictable outcome of how executive leaders are developed, selected, and held accountable long before a crisis occurs.

When leadership appointments are made without rigorous and transparent evaluation of operational qualifications aligned to the specific risks a city faces, the system itself becomes vulnerable, regardless of the integrity or dedication of the individuals appointed. A fire chief's primary responsibility is operational: possessing the experience necessary to keep a city safe

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<sup>19</sup> <https://abc7.com/post/los-angeles-cut-175m-fire-department-budget-months-before-palisades-signed-mayor-karen-bass/15782731/>

when disasters occur. In my experience, a department's preparedness posture is shaped by leadership selection and accountability structures long before an incident begins.

## **After-Action Review Process**

After-action reports exist to establish the facts, assess decisions against wildfire doctrine, identify leadership and systemic failures, and prevent recurrence. When they are softened or altered for political or institutional protection, they fail their purpose and increase the risk of future loss of life, property, and firefighter safety.

Following the Palisades Fire, fire department and city leadership altered the internal findings despite documented<sup>20</sup> pushback from the independent review team, which included some of the most experienced and respected firefighters in the Los Angeles Fire Department.<sup>21</sup>

These subject-matter experts, representing all ranks, were widely recognized for their competence, credibility, and integrity. Despite this, their critical observations were deleted or diluted, conclusions were softened, documented failures were removed, and key deficiencies were reframed or minimized.

This was not a matter of editorial judgment or good-faith disagreement. By the fire department leadership's own admission, the findings were deliberately shaped to construct a preferred narrative, shielding city leadership from accountability and protecting the reputations of certain individuals.

This conduct directly undermined the purpose and required independence of the after-action review and raises serious concerns regarding compliance with California Government Code § 815.6, which governs mandatory duties, including the integrity and reliability of required fire department after-action reporting.

I have co-authored several after-action reports, including for fires in the Pacific Palisades. Those reports documented failures, successes and hard-earned operational lessons specific to that terrain, access limitations, fuel conditions, evacuations and wind behavior. They clearly outlined how fires in the Pacific Palisades must be managed to prevent escalation.

Ignoring or rewriting those lessons does not make risk disappear. It guarantees that the same failures will be repeated. When deception within a public agency becomes normalized, operational failure follows, and people are put at risk.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.firerescue1.com/wildfire-and-wildland-urban-interface/highly-unprofessional-lafd-wildfire-after-action-report-author-rejects-final-draft-over-major-deletions>

<sup>21</sup> [https://ens.lacity.org/lafd/lafdreport/lafdlafdreport1864192431\\_10212025.pdf](https://ens.lacity.org/lafd/lafdreport/lafdlafdreport1864192431_10212025.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> <https://ktla.com/news/california/wildfires/los-angeles-firestorm/los-angeles-fire-chief-admits-failures-after-palisades-fire/>



## **Recovery, Rebuilding, and the Risk of a Secondary Disaster**

The recovery and rebuilding process now faces a city weighed down by bureaucracy and endless red tape, delaying reconstruction, driving residents away, and threatening the return of community life and vibrancy<sup>23</sup>. I have been directly involved in both small- and large-scale building approvals and have seen even simple projects stalled for years before construction begins.

If these same archaic processes govern post-fire recovery, the rebuilding effort itself risks becoming a slow-moving disaster, one that permanently displaces residents, undermines economic recovery, and erodes the long-term stability of the community.

## **Firefighter Exposure and Long-Term Health Consequences**

Firefighters assigned to the Palisades Fire operated under conditions that were predictably lethal, extreme heat, dense smoke, and toxic combustion products, while some simultaneously faced the loss of their own homes. These exposures are not abstract risks; they are known pathways to duty-connected disease, permanent disability, and premature death. The physical and emotional trauma carried by firefighters from incidents like this does not end when the flames are extinguished.

I know this firsthand. I am a cancer survivor as a direct result of my work in the fire service. For many firefighters, the true cost of duty is paid years later, through cancers, chronic illness, and deaths that are inseparable from the work they perform. When that happens, the burden falls not only on the firefighter, but on their families.

I am grateful to Congress and the President of the United States for recognizing this reality through the recent passage of the 2025 Honoring Our Fallen Heroes Act<sup>24</sup>, which provides vital benefits to firefighters' families and essential support for those who have died or been disabled due to service-related cancers. I also thank the International Association of Fire Fighters for its steadfast advocacy on behalf of firefighter safety and its continued work with our nation's leaders to ensure a safer future for firefighters across the country.

## **Conclusion**

The Palisades Fire was not an unavoidable act of nature. It was a preventable event, the outcome of which was largely determined before ignition and before extreme wind conditions arrived. The risks were known, the forecasts were clear, and the Pacific Palisades had a well-established wildfire response plan informed by decades of experience. That plan was not fully implemented.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.pacificresearch.org/despite-fast-track-promises-la-rebuilding-is-mired-in-red-tape/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.iaff.org/news/senate-passes-honor-act-recognizing-fire-fighter-cancer-as-line-of-duty-death/>

This report demonstrates that once the fire became wind-driven, meaningful containment options disappeared. The failure was not one of knowledge, policy, or precedent, but of leadership, initiative, execution and accountability.

This report is grounded in a core principle of crisis management: When leaders act early on known risk, disasters are prevented. When leaders delay, defer, or minimize risk, disasters are manufactured. The Palisades Fire was not caused by weather alone, it was caused by decisions made before the wind arrived.

In Los Angeles, political influence has compromised leadership selection, operational readiness and the integrity of after-action reporting. When a system is permitted to investigate and edit its own failures, accountability erodes. Only independent oversight can examine these decisions and ensure that public-safety actions are driven by risk and responsibility, not politics.

***Political failure created the conditions for disaster—but fire department leadership enabled it.***