

# **INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS**



Statement of

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before the

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT,  
INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS AND THE  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
UNITED STATES SENATE**

on

**WILDFIRES: ASSESSING FIRST RESPONDER TRAINING  
AND CAPABILITIES**

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Good afternoon Chairman Begich, Ranking Member Paul, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Kevin O'Connor and I serve as Assistant to the General President for the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF). I offer today's testimony on behalf of IAFF General President Harold Schaitberger and the 300,000 professional fire fighters and emergency medical personnel who comprise our organization.

In recent years, wildland fires have increased in both frequency and intensity, posing a significant threat to life and property across much of the United States. From 2003 – 2012, in excess of 17 million acres have been scorched by wildfires, fires which claimed the lives of over 300 civilians and fire fighters, destroyed 34,000 homes and resulted in insurance claims in excess of \$70 billion. The numerous fires currently threatening Alaska and its citizens are only the most recent example of a problem which is expected to grow throughout the United States in the coming years.

Mr. Chairman, I testify today not only as a representative of the IAFF, but as a former Baltimore County fire fighter. I am not qualified to opine on the cause of increased wildfire activity. No doubt, changes in climate, population growth and development into the wildland-urban interface contribute to the wildfire threat, but regardless of its root cause, the scourge of wildfires has become epidemic and will continue to imperil our communities and first responders if we do not act.

### **Improved Coordination**

As the primary agencies responsible for managing wildfires at the federal level, the Forest Service and several agencies within the Department of the Interior are uniquely positioned to make deep inroads into the wildfire problem. Unfortunately, as wildfires and the communities they threaten have evolved, the federal government has not. The Forest Service and DOI are hampered by an outdated philosophy focused on land management, which, while appropriate for the wildfire problem of thirty or forty years ago, is simply insufficient to face today's challenges.

The starkest evidence of this fact is that the Forest Service. Fire and Aviation Management has routinely accounted for approximately half of the USFS's total expenditures. Yet, the Director who manages fire fighting operations is not part of senior management. Conversely, within DHS by comparison, the role of the FEMA Director and even the subordinate position of US Fire Administrator hold far more prominence. The stature and authority of the FAAM Director should certainly be elevated. In our view, it should be at the same level of the Chief Forester.

That said, we believe the beginnings of USFS's evolution are starting to coalesce. Congress recognized the importance of overhauling wildland fire management in writing the FLAME Act, which mandated the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy. This strategy, recently transmitted to Congress, establishes a national vision for wildland fire management which includes, among other things, recommendations on providing an effective and efficient wildland response. While we applaud the Congress and the stakeholders for its efforts in devising the Strategy and believe it provides a good start to managing the nation's fire problem, we believe it does not go far enough.

In the 1960s and 70s, American cities were blighted by an epidemic of arson and fire deaths, analogous to the issues surrounding wildland fires today. To address the urban fire crisis, President Nixon appointed a large and diverse group to study and make recommendations on the problem of urban fire loss. In 1973, the National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control issued its landmark report "America Burning." Over forty years later, the fire service community recognizes the lasting impact of the document – its conclusions and recommendations are frequently referenced, and have made a significant difference in combating the urban fire problem.

We believe now is the time for the federal government to take a similar approach to the wildland fire problem. More than a dozen federal agencies and coordinating organizations, state and local governments, the fire service, industry, code enforcement agencies, insurance companies, and scores of other entities have a direct interest in combating wildland fires. Close cooperation and coordination among all stakeholders is indispensable to effectively combat wildland fires. Although the aforementioned National Strategy brought together many of the appropriate governmental and fire stakeholders, the wildfire problem has yet to be addressed with all involved parties at the table.

To that end, we propose the establishment of a Blue Ribbon Commission, tasked with undertaking a comprehensive analysis of the issues associated with wildland fires and make appropriate recommendations to address such issues. Although we have repeatedly implored the Administration to establish such a Commission, incredulously, they have yet to act. The federal government is the only entity that can properly unify all stakeholders to analyze the plethora of issues associated with wildland fires, and we implore them to take action on this common-sense recommendation.

### **Enhancing Fire Fighter Training**

As the Committee is acutely aware, wildland fire fighting is not the exclusive purview of the federal government. State and local fire fighters supplement and complement federal fire fighting efforts. During the annual fire season, which is steadily growing in duration, structural fire fighters are often called upon to fight wildland fires, but few are adequately trained for the task.

It is safe to say that west of the Mississippi and in the southeast that the vast majority of fire fighters will ultimately be called upon to fight a wildfire. We see wildland fires in almost every state.

I myself fought a week long marsh and forest fire in Eastern Baltimore County during my tenure as a structural fire fighter. Certainly, it was an anomaly and I am not expert in wildland fire fighting. However, I was struck at the significant difference between the two jobs. Operations, length of deployment, physical exertion and outcome expectations all varied from what I was accustomed to as a structural fire fighter.

Some state and local fire fighters are trained and certified by the state to respond to wildland fires, but often, structural fire fighters with no such training will be required to respond to a local wildfire. This is especially true as we continue to expand the wildland-urban interface. Unfortunately, local fire

departments often lack sufficient resources to adequately train their personnel in everyday fire fighting tasks, much less provide them the specialized training required to fight a wildfire.

Federal, state and local governments currently spend an excess of \$4.5 billion annually to combat wildfire, an amount which will no doubt increase. Providing training to local fire fighters in areas which are at high-risk for wildfire would allow for a more effective and efficient response. We propose the federal government establish a pilot program to train local fire fighters in high-risk areas. Such cooperation between the federal and local governments will help deter the spread of wildfire on both federal and non-federal lands, saving significant funds in the process.

The IAFF firmly believes fire fighting is an inherently governmental function. When the federal government requires outside assistance to battle wild land fires, it should be standard policy as a default to contract with the state agency or local government that has jurisdiction for fire fighting in the impacted area.

In the event private contractors are required, we must also ensure that those private entities conducting wildfire management operations are well-trained. The private contractors with whom federal, state and local agencies contract often vary widely in training, qualifications and ability. We propose that such contractors be held to the same standards and qualifications as are the fire fighting employees of the respective governmental agency. This not only makes sense from an operational point of view, it provides for a better, and safer, response for all involved.

### **Ensuring Fire Fighter Health and Safety**

As we endeavor to manage wildfires to better protect lives and property, we must also work to better protect the health and safety of the men and women tasked with the difficult job of fighting such fires.

Not quite one year ago, nineteen brave wildland fire fighters, elite members of the highly trained Granite Mountain Hot Shots team and proud members of the United Yavapai Fire Fighters Association, Prescott Chapter Local 3066 died in the line of duty battling the Yarnell Hill fire. The nineteen line-of-duty deaths represented the greatest loss of life of professional fire fighters on a single incident since 9/11.

These tragic deaths, and indeed, the death or injury of any wildland fire fighter, should give us pause. The job of a wildland fire fighter is one of the most physically taxing, emotionally draining, and dangerous jobs there is. The job of a wildland fire fighter is very different from that of a structural fire fighter. And although we know much about the science of protecting structural fire fighters, we are only beginning to examine the impact wildland fire fighting has on the human body, and how to better protect our wildland fire fighters. Historically, a myriad of federal agencies have provided funded and partnered with other stakeholders to study fire fighter safety and health issues including self-contained breathing apparatus, personal protective clothing, safety equipment, apparatus specification, staffing standards, operation efficiencies, the impact of smoke and toxins of fire fighters and other related issues.

Unfortunately, the same commitment and attention has not been provided to the safety and health of wildland fire fighters. Unlike their municipal counterparts, wildland fire fighters are on-scene for days, even weeks at a time, trudging through rough terrain, battling heat and smoke and physically carrying up to 100 pounds of supplies and equipment. We know that the stress induced on the human body in this type of environment can cause significant cognitive, physical, performance and behavioral reactions which can put a fire fighter's safety and health, and that of his coworkers, at risk.

As the nation's leading experts on the topic of fire fighter health and safety, the IAFF is uniquely positioned to spearhead and coordinate research relating to the health and safety of wildland fire fighters and develop measures to reduce their stress load. Good work on these issues has already started. Researchers at San Diego State University, for example, have utilized federal funding to evaluate ensemble protective clothing worn by wildland fire fighters. More recently, preliminary funding from the Department of Agriculture has permitted the University to begin studying the effect of crew size on fire fighter efficiency and safety. If we wish to prevent wildland fire fighter death and injury, it is incumbent that we continue this type of research. We encourage the federal government to continue its investment in these valuable efforts.

### **Funding Challenges**

Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not discuss the significant funding challenges we face in order to pay for wildfire suppression activities. As you know, for years the Forest Service and Department of the Interior have transferred money from vital agency programs and services in order to fund wildfire suppression. This method isn't simply bad public policy, as wildfire suppression costs continue to rise, it is quickly becoming unsustainable. In his budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2015, President Obama unveiled his plan to fund the largest wildfires, those which are truly threats to the homeland, from disaster funds. The President's proposal will provide the federal agencies responsible for managing wildfires with the tools and resources they need to succeed, and it has our full support.

### **Conclusion**

On behalf of the International Association of Fire Fighters, I appreciate the opportunity to offer our perspective on improving wildland fire fighting operations and better protecting the communities, citizens and first responders threatened by wildfire. To the extent the IAFF can assist the Subcommittee in its efforts to better manage the nation's wildfire problem, I am happy to offer our expertise and pledge to work closely with you and your staff.

Again, I'd like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today and am happy to answer any questions you may have.