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Opening Statement

Vice Chair Katie Hill

Hearing on “Courage Under Fire: Examining Government Preparedness and Response to Wildfires in California”

Subcommittee on Environment

August 20, 2019

Good afternoon everyone. I thank the Chair for agreeing to hold this hearing on such an important issue to our constituents. I also want to thank the witnesses for agreeing to appear. Finally, I want to thank the City of Simi Valley for generously making this space available to us today to have this conversation about a critical issue that has touched many, if not all of us.

So many of you in the audience have felt the impacts of these all too common wildfires. Less than a year ago, the Woolsey fire became the most destructive in L.A. County history and the 7th most destructive in state history. You have been evacuated from your homes, you have watched houses and other structures burn, you have felt the anxiety of not knowing what you will come home to.

While many people across the country have watched on TV and social media as these fires continue to burn, affecting the same neighborhoods and communities, year after year, we have experienced them first hand. My family and I have been personally impacted by these fires. I had to evacuate from my home last summer -- we had to trailer my horse, and relocate my goats and dogs to my sister's house only for my sister later be evacuated from her home too. This was not the first time we had to leave our homes because of a wildfire. It has become a common occurrence for people in areas like ours- and I know that so many constituents here in Simi Valley and throughout the district and the state have endured evacuations just like I have. Some have returned to find their homes damaged or completely destroyed.

Our communities face constant uncertainty and we fear for our homes, families, and sometimes for our lives. Wildfires have always been a part of life in California. However, because fire prone areas are vastly more populated than they were decades ago, the risks we face are more potent today than ever before.

I cannot express how grateful I am for the tireless work of our dedicated and courageous firefighters and first responders. With the hot and dry conditions and heavy winds they encounter, containing and extinguishing these fires is often a herculean task. We must all do our part to prevent these out of control wildfires from burning through our neighborhoods and work together to mitigate the damage when they do. This includes our local, county, state, and federal agencies.

We need to talk about the root causes of these wildfires and their impacts on our communities and acknowledge that climate change has been a major driver of the destruction that has been wrought throughout our states. Over the last century, Southern California has grown about 3 degrees warmer. It is not a coincidence that we have also been experiencing larger and more frequent fires wildfires over the past few decades. Higher temperatures and longer and more severe droughts dry out vegetation, making our landscape a virtual tinder box. We are also seeing more winter rain in fire prone areas. This leads to more growth, which can be dried out during our hot summers, and in some areas, ultimately become fuel for more fires.

Wildland fires, including large fires, are a natural part of ecosystems in California, and many native plants and animals depend on the habitat created by fires. That being said, we must also address the fact that many wildfires do not occur naturally but are instead the result of human action or inaction. Some are caused by a person's negligence or thoughtlessness, such as a camp fire left to burn or a lit cigarette discarded in the middle of dry brush. Equipment belonging to California utility companies has been responsible for igniting some of the most catastrophic wildfires with the most severe impacts to communities in state history. Consumers should not bear the heavy burden of paying for damage that these companies are responsible for. We need to find an equitable and effective solution for the role that the utility companies play in causing wildfires and for the hefty price of clean up and repair after these fires have burned through our communities.

Last month I introduced an amendment on the House floor to address our new wildfire reality. The amendment increases funding for wildfire preparedness, suppression, and emergency rehabilitation bringing funding for these critical issues to a total of \$5.2 billion. This is one step in the right direction, but we must continue to work at finding evidence based effective solutions that will help keep communities in California and across the country safe.

We cannot be complacent as wildfires continue to devastate our communities. It would be irresponsible to pretend that fire seasons today are no different from fire seasons of the past. Yes, this is our new normal, but we can and must do better to protect communities from wildland fires, and that's where the focus of our resources and attention should be.

For my community, for California, and for states across the country experiencing the devastating effects of wildfires, we need to work together.

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