

**Chairman Peters Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery**  
**Full Committee Hearing: Wildfires**  
**March 14, 2024**

The Committee will come to order.

Wildfires are an increasing threat to our country. They have gotten bigger, burned more land, and put more communities in danger. Last year alone, wildfires affected Americans from Hawaii to the Great Smokey Mountains. This year, they will likely get even worse.

As we sit here today, communities in Texas just recently finished fighting the largest wildfire in the history of the state. It burned almost 1.4 million acres of land – taking lives, damaging houses, devastating agriculture, displacing families, and leaving property across the northern edge of the state in ruin.

Last August's fire in Maui was also catastrophic and even more deadly. It took the lives of over 100 people and shattered countless communities. It was the deadliest wildfire in our country in over a century. I would like to enter into the record testimony from the Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement and from the Mayor of Maui County regarding the ongoing recovery in Maui. Without objection.

These are just a few examples of a new crisis – one that's putting more and more Americans at risk.

The effects of these fires aren't only physical danger and property damage. They also bring a host of health risks to our communities, even in locations hundreds of miles from the fire. Last year, large swaths of eastern U.S. were impacted by wildfire smoke from Canada, causing unhealthy air quality. Inhaling smoke causes lung disease, heart problems, and cancer. As wildfires grow more common in urban communities, they can burn dangerous synthetic materials. Even after the fire is over, the threat remains. Aftereffects like floods, mudslides, and barren land can threaten public safety for years.

But it doesn't stop there. Wildfires are also unbelievably expensive. They amount to billions of dollars in response and recovery costs, as well as economic losses, every year. Our state and local governments have to spend already limited resources responding to these disasters – often more than they can afford.

Businesses lose money, properties lose value, infrastructure gets damaged, and industries are changed for good. This isn't just a land management issue anymore – it's also an emerging crisis of public health, emergency management, and economic security.

That's partly due to development. We're building more in the "wildland-urban interface," a term for the transitional zone between unoccupied land and settled property. That brings us closer to wildfires that in the past could be contained to uninhabited land.

This problem is also exacerbated by climate change. We have higher temperatures, more droughts, and a host of other ecological factors that make wildfires more dangerous. They are one of the gravest consequences of global climate change.

In short, this is a serious problem, climate change is making it worse, and we have to improve our response, recovery, and mitigation efforts.

We have a few key tools for that work. FEMA is the government agency tasked with disaster relief, and wildfires affecting communities falls under its purview. FEMA handles declarations and gives out key resources to communities affected by wildfires. But the increasing danger posed by wildfires has revealed gaps in this agency's infrastructure. For instance, many of its programs were designed for other hazards, like floods and hurricanes, and do not adequately meet the needs of wildfires. I look forward to hearing from our panel of witnesses on what FEMA needs in order to properly mitigate this threat.

Our witnesses will also provide valuable insight on the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission. The Commission, which I want to thank Senator Romney for championing, was marked up in this Committee and signed into law as part of the bipartisan infrastructure law. It offered a sweeping review of our government's response to wildfires and what we need to improve. It was co-chaired by FEMA, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of the Interior – and released nearly 150 recommendations this past September.

The report outlined ways we can expand our workforce to fight fires, modernize the tools we use, invest in resilient infrastructure, and adopt a proactive approach, so our communities can be better prepared to face this problem in the future.

As a response to that report, our committee has taken some key steps.

Last year, the Senate passed my bipartisan *Disaster Assistance Simplification Act*, which makes it easier for people to get the help they need after wildfires and other serious natural disasters. This Congress, the Senate passed the *Fire Grants and Safety Act*, which will help expand our workforce and support firefighters across America. This Committee has also passed the *Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act* – led by Senator Sinema – to establish a permanent, updated pay scale for federal firefighters. We will continue working to advance this bipartisan legislation through Congress to prevent a pay cliff for wildland firefighters at the end of the fiscal year.

But there is still so much more we need to do. Wildfires have become a crisis for our country – one that calls for bold and comprehensive solutions. This threat isn't going anywhere, and this committee must play a central role in our federal government's response. Today's discussion – and our expert witnesses – represent a step towards that goal.