

Testimony of

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**“WHAT THE OCTOBER WILDFIRES REVEAL ABOUT PREPAREDNESS IN
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA”**

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OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM COMMITTEE

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Good morning Chairman Kucinich, Congressman Issa, and members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify today. As Cal Fire Chief, let me begin by saying that saving lives is always the first priority of firefighters who respond to any wildfire. Emergency disaster response is a highly coordinated skill that takes years of experience, cooperation among many entities, and millions of dollars put into place. It works better in California than anywhere else in the world.

During the October firestorm, the actions performed by all emergency responders resulted in dramatic improvements over the 2003 fires. The State was prepared like never before. Cal Fire, the US Forest Service, and local government pre-deployed additional engines, aircraft and personnel to southern California in advance of the fires because we knew of the potential risk the weather conditions presented. This level of pre-deployment did not occur in 2003.

Fire weather personnel predicted the Santa Ana winds to be a moderate event. However the weather began a perfect storm of high temperatures, low humidity, and high wind speeds, at times reaching hurricane-level speeds in some areas.

During the October fires, we mobilized more and different equipment faster than we did in 2003. In fact in a 2-day timeframe, we mobilized more than we did in the 6-day 2003 fire siege. There were over 15,000 firefighters on the ground and in the air fighting the southern California wildfires. Through various mutual aid agreements we received assistance from our neighboring states like Arizona, Idaho, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, and from across the border by the country of Mexico. We also received military support from Wyoming, Colorado, and North Carolina. In total, approximately 1,145 different fire departments were fighting these wildfires.

Let me also mention that in addition to the 23 large fires that occurred in California's six southern counties, another 251 vegetation fires were extinguished by fire service personnel out without damage between October 20-25.

No one can deny that the collective response and performance of the emergency personnel in October was anything but extraordinary. They managed the most orderly mass evacuation in the State's history. Authorities estimate nearly half a million residents were evacuated from the path of the fires. Lives and homes were saved by emergency personnel who risked their own lives over and over. Despite worse conditions faced this year, the 2003 fires resulted in hundreds of more homes destroyed and more lives lost.

Any firefighting professional will tell you that fires are fought and won on the ground. Aircraft is certainly an important tool, but planes and helicopters are not effective without firefighters, engines, watertenders, and bulldozers on the ground, and assisted by an effective evacuation plan and properly managed shelters. All these components must

together in tandem to achieve the best results. The safety of the public and first responders is always their top priority.

In October we had 23 fires burning at once, and any firefighter can tell you that the conditions at each fire varied widely. Weather, terrain and visibility can vary erratically in southern California. The sheer magnitude of the October fires was incredible, and the fires moved in ways experienced firefighters had never seen. In some locations, flames were advancing at an acre per second amid 80 mph wind gusts.

There has been a lot of focus on the air coverage – use of or limited use of – for these fires, but focusing solely on that aspect minimizes the primary role of most firefighters and their successful efforts. Every firefighter – on the ground or in the air – wants to succeed. With safety our priority, I strongly believe that only the professionals can decide when it is safe to fly to defend structures. Since the fires, many tanker pilots said they tried to fly when it was not safe to fly and the weather forced them to turn back. Many of these pilots are retired military and have been flying fire missions for decades. During these last fires, every aerial mission that could safely be flown was launched. Cal Fire aircraft alone flew over 800 hours and dropped over 1.5 million gallons of fire retardant.

Including military aircraft into a fire fight was one of the Blue Ribbon Commission's recommendations after the 2003 fires. Cal Fire has had an agreement with the California National Guard and the Navy Reserves for over three years. This agreement has worked well with both services to provide training and coordination of assets prior to fires and missions during fires.

Realizing that additional military aircraft assets could have been put into the firefight sooner, Cal Fire has already entered into an interim agreement with the Marine Corps in this area. Cal Fire aviation personnel have completed four hours of classroom instruction for over 70 Marine helicopter pilots and flight crew. On November 28, Cal Fire and the marines began working out a long term agreement similar to the MOU we have with the California National Guard and the Navy Reserves. It is our goal to have the MOU completed and signed by the end of the year.

Since the October fires, we have experienced two additional extreme Santa Ana weather conditions. Both times allowed us to test the new agreement with the marines and they provided a number of helicopters, 12 and 2 respectfully, during our pre-planning and pre-deployment of assets for these events. Luckily neither of these wind alerts caused a repeat of the devastating fires we had just a few weeks ago.

All firefighting activity puts the safety of the public and first responders first. Because it is a safety issue for the personnel in the air, as well as on the ground during firefighting operations, military helicopter managers (or “spotter” as they have been referred to) are

required to be onboard military helicopters when they perform water or retardant dropping missions. This is a Federal requirement from the National Interagency Mobilization Guide, Chapter 20 (Military Assets), Section 27.1 (E)(4)(a)(b). To make sure we comply with this Federal mandate during the next fire event, Cal Fire is in the process of increasing its number of military helicopter managers.

Due to the unique military presence in San Diego County, all fire departments with aviation programs in the greater county regional area have been contacted by the department to identify experienced firefighting aviation personnel who can be trained and certified as military helicopter managers. This will increase the number of military helicopter managers available in the local area. Both Cal Fire and the US Forest Service have the authority to train and certify military helicopter managers, so together we can maximize the number of qualified personnel trained and available for this specialized assignment in this region.

Pre-planning and pre-deployment of equipment and personnel allowed fire fighters to be more aggressive in the early days of the fire fight. Now that we are working toward a long term agreement with the marines, they will be contacted by Cal Fire and included in the pre-planning process like the California National Guard and the Navy Reserves have been. This new partnership will ensure that enough military helicopter managers are available for the increased number of military helicopter assets provided.

Under normal conditions, local firefighting officials have rapid access to mutual aid from other local government fire agencies as well as Cal Fire resources. The calls for assistance are acted on immediately as resources are available. Improved communications among the multiple jurisdictions make this process work quickly and efficiently. However during the October fires, some local areas with limited assets were stretched thin requiring state and federal assets to fill these gaps.

With assets available in the state stretched, California worked through other mutual aid channels between states and through the federal process. While resources were provide from several states, there were challenges to the system. Resources requested through the EMAC (Emergency Management Assistance Compact) system were received from other states much quicker than through the federal request process. The federal Resource Ordering and Status System (ROSS) was slower and broke down several times due to an overload of the system. These are issues which will need to be addressed at the local, State and federal levels.

To be most effective, improvements in emergency response capability must be accompanied by better utilization of local resources, improved local land use decisions, better local planning, improved building construction, increased defensible space, and more fuel treatments of forested lands and vegetation near communities. Planned areas

for sheltering-in-place or areas of refuge that could minimize large scale evacuations must be part of land developments in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). To achieve these goals, partnerships must be formed between the state and local governments and new standards must be adopted.

California has recently adopted two new prevention standards. The new Wildland Urban Interface Building Standards become mandatory next month (January 2008). For the past two years, these codes have been voluntary. The new codes will require buildings built in high fire severity zones to be constructed under newly adopted standards for ignition resistant materials on the exterior of the buildings.

The State has also adopted new 100 feet defensible space standards which went into effect in 2006. The standards require 30 feet of lean, green, and clean space around homes and an additional 70 feet of reduced fuel loads. Along with defensible space, these standards are expected to reduce the potential for ignition from radiant heat, direct flame contact, and flying embers during wildfires.

Governor Schwarzenegger understands the threat of wildfires and the need to maximize fire prevention and fighting capabilities. He has increased Cal Fire's general fund budget for firefighting from \$309 million in 2003 to the current budget's \$568 million, a boost of \$259 million or about 84 percent over four years. Cal Fire now has 336 engines, and we have invested another \$26 million in 108 new engines to replace old trucks since 2003.

The Governor has also supported the increase to four firefighters on Cal Fire engine crews in fire-threat areas, added Wildland Urban Interface inspectors to conduct defensible space inspections in high-hazard areas, and approved the contract for the use of the DC-10 supertanker. Through the Governor's budget support, Cal Fire has increased the level of fire prevention public awareness and education utilizing Cal Fire Volunteers in Prevention, Fire Safe Councils, and numerous non-profit community groups.

There is no doubt that California's emergency responders are the best first responders in the world. Our response to the October fires was faster and far more substantial than the response in 2003. After each fire incident we review every aspect of our fire fighting response to identify areas where improvements can be made. Then we make them. First responders want to succeed and we always want to fight fires better and faster the next time.

Chairman, and members of the committee, thank you again for inviting me here today. I look forward to answering any questions you or your colleagues may have.