

Chairman Michael McCaul
Opening Remarks
As Prepared for Delivery
October 17, 2011, 10:00am CT

Homeland Security Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations & Management
Austin Field Hearing

“Texas Wildfire Review: Did Bureaucracy Prevent a Timely Response?”

Good morning and welcome to this Congressional Field Hearing in my home state of Texas, which has unfortunately been the epicenter of a great natural disaster this year.

Anyone who lives in here knows it’s hot, and we experience our share of wildfires. But the summer of 2011 was off the charts.

For many cities it was the hottest summer on record. Here in Austin we experienced 90 days with temperatures above 100 degrees. A worsening drought turned the state’s vegetation into dry tinder. Texas was indeed a tinderbox.

This confluence of events set America’s backyard ablaze. Since January 1, according to the Texas Forest Service, the state has experienced 3,129 fires, which have scorched 3.8 million acres – an area as large as the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined.

Over Labor Day weekend, Tropical Storm Lee exacerbated the spread of fire delivering high winds instead of much needed rain. Just a few miles from where we sit today erupted arguably the worst wildfire in Texas history.

The Bastrop fire was a daunting 16 miles long, 4 miles wide, and scorched almost everything in its path.

Nearly 35,000 acres of pines, more than 1,500 homes destroyed and thousands more evacuated. Two people lost their lives.

I commend the 800 local Texas fire fighters, many of them volunteers, who quickly answered the call—“Texas is burning and we need you.”

I wish I could also recognize and commend the Federal Government. Unfortunately these fires are tragic examples of what appears to be a lack of planning and slow response because of bureaucratic red tape.

Let me first unravel the red tape. The process to file a claim starts with the county filing a request for assistance to the State. The State then files with the Federal Emergency Management Regional Administrator. The Regional Administrator then files a request with FEMA. FEMA

assesses the request, and makes a recommendation to the White House. Finally, the President has the last word, and either approves or disapproves request.

Help should be a phone call away, not a series of requests winding their way through a bureaucratic maze.

Texas followed the process, asking for relief for 252 of our 254 counties over an extended period of time. This is what the people of Texas said they needed to fight these fires. Upon FEMA's recommendation, the President only awarded 45 counties relief, and no immediate firefighting aircraft support.

This inadequate funding wasn't even an immediate directive. It took the president 13 days to sign the declaration. During that period the president made time to assist Alabama's tornado disasters and even visited Alabama to see its devastation.

Meanwhile, Texas burned. This is unacceptable.

Help should be a phone call away.

So today I would like to know:

1. Why was there a delay in deploying critical resources? Why did it take weeks?
2. What is the formula FEMA uses to decide how much assistance to provide and what resources to send? And how much subjectivity is involved?
3. Why does FEMA continue to use a county by county assessment of relief rather than a regional basis?

To ensure this situation does not happen again, FEMA must streamline its application process for disaster declarations to immediately start providing aid, cleanup, and the rebuilding process. Many Texas fire departments had to choose between filling out paperwork to meet FEMA deadlines and fighting fires that continued to burn.

Going forward we must strategically pre-position federal firefighting aviation assets in high risk areas. Despite all the meteorological warnings that Texas faced with it being the driest summer in more than 100 years, there were no pre-positioned aircraft to help. The lack of an immediate response from these aircraft assets caused significant delays in fighting the fires in Bastrop County, where more than 1,500 homes were destroyed, and lives lost.

FEMA must also change its defined jurisdictions for declarations. FEMA must move to a regional based program, rather than the current county based program. This will lend assistance to counties whose resources were depleted helping neighboring communities.

What happened in Texas is inexcusable and unacceptable.

The homes of good Americans were scorched, and lives were lost. The federal government stood by, taking almost a week to assist the local efforts at fighting the blaze. Nearby assets that could have stopped the fire sooner were tied up in red tape.

My hope is that today we can find some answers, and start moving toward solutions.

#