

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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Opening Statement Chairman Harley Rouda Hearing on “Courage Under Fire: Examining Government Preparedness and Response to Wildfires in California” Subcommittee on Environment August 20, 2019

Good morning, and welcome to the second hearing this Congress that the Environment Subcommittee has held in my home state of California. I would like to extend a special thanks to my colleague, Representative Katie Hill, for working with my staff to organize this hearing here, in her home district, on what is arguably one of the most important issues facing Californians today: managing and responding to destructive wildfires that, over the past two seasons, have caused the deaths of more than 100 people, destroyed thousands of homes, and exposed millions of urban and rural Californians to unhealthy air. These wildfires are an emergency, and I want to assure everyone here that we in Congress are addressing them as such.

At times like these, DC can seem so far from California, both physically and metaphorically. We in Congress know that Californians might look at us and say, you elected officials don't really get what we've lived through, what we have to suffer. But we do, and we are holding this hearing today in Simi Valley because we know that we need to be home, to hear about the scope of this problem directly from the source. My colleague who represents this district, Representative Hill, was forced to flee when her hometown was struck by the Stone Fire in 2018. She and her family experienced losses that we wouldn't wish on anybody. So I want you all to know that we in Congress see you, and we hear you—because we *are* you. These are our homes, our communities, our friends, our neighbors, and our beautiful state that is being destroyed.

And so we are here today, holding this hearing, with three goals in mind. First, we will examine the status of the recovery from the two deadliest wildfires in the state's history, in 2017 and 2018 as well as challenges we are facing going into the peak of the 2019 wildfire season. We will ask how the federal, state and local governments could be working more effectively, both together and on their own, to ensure that basic needs of wildfire recovery are met: that debris is removed quickly and efficiently, that there is sufficient and affordable housing for people who have been displaced, and that all people who are in need of public assistance can access it.

It is our new reality that wildfires are occurring in more urban areas and wildfires are becoming more intense and more frequent due to climate change. So, in the future, FEMA is going to be playing a much bigger role with wildfire response and recovery than they have in years past, and fire management will expand outside the usual purview of the state government, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior. We in Congress want to help FEMA in taking on this new and challenging role, and we

want this hearing to serve as an essential step to do just that. We also want to hear about wildfire mitigation strategies that are being implemented on the state as well as federal government level and areas where we can improve at all levels of government to better prepare for these devastating wildfires.

The second goal of this hearing is to underscore the enormous public health consequences of wildfires, especially when fires ravage densely populated areas. Burning vegetation releases particulate matter into the air that cause inflammation and irritation in the lungs, which decreases lung and heart functionality over time, in addition to exacerbating symptoms of asthma and emphysema.

And as if that's not bad enough, the 2018 Paradise Wildfire revealed another major public health threat—the release and spread of toxic chemicals. When wildfires ravage urban communities, which in the past was very rare, chemicals such as lead and asbestos that are contained in pipes, building materials, refrigerators and other household necessities get released into our air, our soil, and our water.

Finally, this hearing will demonstrate that if we in the federal government don't take action on climate change, we are digging our own graves—fire by fire, hurricane by hurricane, heat wave by heat wave.

The statistics from last year's wildfires *alone* should make our heads spin: Total economic losses to the state of California were estimated to run at least \$400 billion, making the 2018 wildfire season the most expensive natural disaster in the history of the United States. State and federal authorities say that it will cost at least \$3 billion to clear debris from 19,000 homes and businesses. Over 1.8 million acres of land burned last year, approximately two and a half times the amount of land that burned the previous year, in 2017.

But, to be honest, as horrifying as these numbers are, they don't come close to getting at the true devastation wrought by wildfires. Fires don't just damage homes that can later be repaired; they *destroy* homes. They reduce families' entire histories to piles of toxic rubble.

My home, like every American, is fundamentally a part of who I am. Everything we keep in our home tells our stories – that old photo album, the high school yearbook, our children's old art work. These are stories that we cannot bear to part with, family heirlooms that have been passed down through generations...it's all there, in our home. And if we were to lose it, we will have lost a core part of ourselves. I can't begin to imagine the pain of watching the life you've built burn before your eyes. And yet we in Congress have not done enough to mitigate these wildfires for the future, because we're wasting our time arguing over whether climate change is even real. There's no other word for it but shameful.

Let me end by quoting from the state of California's Fourth National Climate Change Assessment: "By 2100, if greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, one study found that the frequency of extreme wildfires burning over approximately 25,000 acres would increase by nearly 50 percent, and that average area burned statewide would increase by 77 percent by the end of the century."

People in California have seen the extraordinary damage wildfires have done just in the past two years; do we want our children and grandchildren to continue to suffer, and worse than we have? Every single person in this room wants the same thing—for our children to have better lives than we do. But little by little, with every day that we don't act, we are chipping away at their future – their homes, their

air, their water, their hearts, their lungs, their livelihoods. We must fight together to make sure this doesn't happen on our watch.

Thank you, and I now invite my colleague on the Subcommittee, and the Vice-Chair for the full Committee on Oversight, Ms. Hill, to give a five-minute opening statement.

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