

Committee on Resources

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SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

**11:00 AM, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2003
LAKE ARROWHEAD**

FIELD HEARING ON RECOVERING FROM THE FIRES: RESTORING AND PROTECTING COMMUNITIES, WATER, WILDLIFE AND FORESTS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Congressional Testimony

**Peter Brierty, Fire Marshal
County of San Bernardino**

Honorable members of the Sub Committee, Mr. Chair

On behalf of the citizens of the County of San Bernardino, and the Board of Supervisors, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

Last month these mountain residents dodged a bullet. A bullet that could have taken the life off of, if not the life out of these mountains.

I realize, that today, across our great nation, there are other forests with as many or possibly more dead and dying trees. But those forests are not the most popular; they are not the most visited; they are not the most populated; they do not contain eight billion dollars of assessed value of businesses, and homes, the homes of our citizens.

POST FIRE REHABILITATION MAST

To manage the bark beetle problem the Board of Supervisors, 18 months ago, authorized that the Mountain Area Safety Taskforce MAST be the administrative structure to manage this multi jurisdictional emergency. The efforts of MAST paid great dividends in our response to the fire here on the mountain. With that in mind, the County's Office of Emergency Services is reinvesting those benefits of the MAST model and has initiated an action plan in cooperation with our Flood Control Districts to mitigate the effects of debris and flood runoff from the burned areas.

There are now 30 miles of burned foothills, moonscape, from La Verne in LA County across the front country to the Seven Oaks Dam east of Highland. This flood threat is not only a physical threat of debris and mud flows to property owners down stream but also threatens the quality of our drinking water, not just in the foothills but the quality of the drinking water of millions of Southern Californians.

Under the original construct of MAST, a year before the fire started, a division was designed to address re-forestation. As we speak, the Lake Arrowhead Community Services District is creating a Customer Report that provides citizens valuable information on Erosion Control. This is a companion document to their previous publication providing information on proper planting and replanting of fire resistant, drought tolerant plants in the mountain communities. This week alone several meetings have been held between Agency reps, Registered Professional Foresters, Arborists, Fire Safe Councils, the Resource Conservation Service and citizens in efforts to coordinate, educate, communicate and initiate action on the issues of proper replanting, healthy re-forestation and erosion control.

The House Resources Committee's continued support of these community-based operations is critical to the long-term success of these endeavors.

FIRE PREVENTION PRIVATE SECTOR PROPERTIES

We need to maximize the funding of fire hazard mitigation and dead tree removal in the private land holdings. As of November 1st the Fire Siege of California consumed almost 800,000 acres. 68% of what burned was private lands only 32% was Federal Land.

I would ask that Congress encourage the USFS to utilize the maximum flexibility provided within the act to fund efforts to mitigate fire threat on private lands that are surrounded by the forest boundary. There are 49,000 improved parcels, parcels with homes and businesses on private lands adjacent to the boundaries of the San Bernardino National Forest. Only a small minority of our mountain homes are actually on USFS lands.

I would also ask that the Forest Service make their highest priority, those projects that will protect our communities. They should endeavor to provide fuels treatments, fire protection zones or shaded fuel breaks in cooperation with local fire jurisdictions and create them immediately adjacent to our communities. I recognize some controversy in their effectiveness during a Santa Ana condition, but they are effective at reducing the velocity and momentum of fire and they do provide a degree of protection to our communities. A degree that doesn't exist today.

FIRE SAFE COUNCILS

I would ask that funding not only be provided to local agencies to remove the dead trees but also funding must be provided to our Fire Safe Councils. The Byzantine grant approval system that is used today is too cumbersome and time consuming, these folks are ready to act today. These citizen led organizations have made terrific progress in every community across this mountain. Their tireless efforts to motivate, educate and organize have paid great dividends to our mountain communities. Among many successes, their town hall meetings, standing room only, were clearly the "foundation for success" of the Sheriff's Office safely evacuating over 50,000 people off of this mountain in only a few days. Some have said that it was the largest evacuation in the State's history. If it wasn't the largest it was the most calm and the most polite.

SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT

We must reconsider our definition of "tree removal". It is no longer just felling the tree. Tree removal now needs to include the development and utilization of infrastructure to utilize all of the wood products from the tree and consider them raw materials not waste. The County has taken actions that are financing initial efforts to develop much needed wood products utilization, but much more can be done with your help. At our last meeting, tree removal operations were creating 600 tons of wood waste a day, now we have exceeded 800 tons a day and this is without the Southern California Edison tree removal operations in full swing. Their participation will likely move us to 1600 tons a day. To put this in perspective, before the crisis, we managed 5 tons a day. Another source to consider is that the figures I have quoted only includes activity on private lands. It does not include the Federal lands, which is roughly an area 10 times larger. The solutions that we consider must include beneficial uses for all wood products regardless of their origin.

FIRE RESPONSE

We must also examine the National Fire Plan and National Wildland Policy in regard to how local agencies are reimbursed when wild land fires threaten structures on private lands. Local governments, whose citizens all pay federal taxes, incur great expense in providing structure protection during these events and do not have the mechanisms or funding in place to pay for response to threats from outside their jurisdictions. With over 350 Counties, Cities and Tribes participating the specter of uncompensated provision of service is wearing thin the fabric of the best mutual aid system in the Country.

PRESIDENTS HEALTHY FOREST INITIATIVE

In recent days it has been somewhat frustrating to hear that the Presidents Healthy Forest Initiative was immaterial to the California Fire Siege of 2003. The detractors state that the fire was mostly in chaparral and coastal sage. I am here to tell you that our local mountain fire fighters were not going to allow this fire to burn into this forest just to make a point. Some say it was a little luck, some say it was the weather, but I will say that there was a lot of planning from our Mountain Area Safety Task Force, and preparation by our citizens and the bottom line some incredible fire fighting, nothing less than heroic fire fighting that kept this fire out of the greater parts of our mountain communities and out of the forest.

The Seige of 2003 is now recognized as the largest fire in California history with over 3 thousand homes

lost. These fire fighters kept this fire from getting into the dead trees and saved ten times that number of homes. Homes that would have been lost had this fire gotten into our dead forest.

The fire affected fewer than 5% of the dead trees, 95% still standing and more dying every day. The threat is real, the treat is still here, and we need your help as much now as we did before.

Again I would like to take a moment to thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to meet with us today. I would particularly like to thank Congressman Jerry Lewis, for his commitment to our citizen's safety and for his tireless efforts to provide funding where none existed. Senator Feinstein should be recognized for her efforts to help us. And I would like to extend a personal thank you to all of you for your commitment to eliminate the fire danger that still exists here in our mountain communities and that someday, we all can say that we gave the gift of a healthy forest to our children, a gift that their children will enjoy. Thank you very much.