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Mayor

Town of Paradise, California

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Committee On Natural Resources

Subcommittee on Federal Lands

*Examining the Challenges Facing Forest Management, Wildfire Suppression, and Wildland*

*Firefighters Ahead of the 2023 Wildfire Year*

Chair Westerman, Ranking Member Grijalva, Chair Tiffany, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share the Town of Paradise's experiences before during and after the 2018 Camp Fire. The Town of Paradise is located in northern California approximately 90 miles north of Sacramento. Prior to the Camp Fire, our population was 26,500, making Paradise the second largest community in Butte County, behind the City of Chico our neighbor to the southwest. Considered a bedroom community, most Paradise residents worked in neighboring cities, and chose to live in Paradise for its forested beauty and cooler temperatures, as well as more affordable housing. Paradise is situated in the foothills on a ridge between two canyons, Butte Creek Canyon to the West and Feather River Canyon to the East. Paradise's location, along with the dense national forests that surround Paradise, and prior to the Camp Fire, dense vegetation that existed within Town limits, made Paradise vulnerable to wildfire.

I moved to Paradise in 1967 at the age of 9 from Los Angeles. My dad built houses, so we moved frequently as he built, sold, built again and so on. I graduated from Paradise High School and did the same as I followed in his footsteps. Out of 24 homes I've lived in, only 2 survived the Camp Fire. In 2012 I was elected to Town Council with the goal of making Paradise more business and builder friendly. I have served as Mayor 3 times, the most recent term as Mayor beginning in December of 2022. In more than 50 years in the Town of Paradise, I have seen and experienced fires of all types, severity, and duration. Fire is nothing new to Paradise, or the hundreds of foothill communities just like it. There are a number of factors that have changed to make wildfires more intense and damaging, which include environmental, situational, and policy-driven factors. In our case, a combination of a historically long dry period, drought conditions, high winds, overgrown properties with too little defensible space, dense neighboring

forests, and electrical equipment failure came together on one fateful day in November 2018 to cause the Camp Fire.

The 2018 Camp Fire ignited on November 8, 2018, and became the most deadly and devastating fire in California history, burning for 17 days, destroying 154,000 acres of public and private property, over 14,000 homes, and 5,000 businesses and other structures. The fire forced the evacuation of more than 52,000 residents, injured 17 people including 5 firefighters, and claimed 85 lives.

November 8<sup>th</sup> 2018 started like a normal Fall day, except the wind was blowing stronger. I was loading up and putting my pup in his kennel in the back of my truck when Kathleen, my wife came outside and said that she had just heard on the radio there was fire on Hwy 70 in Pulga. I looked in the sky in that direction and could see a plume of smoke. I told her I would let her know if I received any updates and was off to start my day.

My typical morning includes running my dog at a grass field behind our church which is next to a middle school charter and then visiting my jobsites before heading into the office. I am a general contractor who builds custom homes. I was on the grass field for about 15 minutes when I could see that plume off in the distance was now a dark cloud falling over half our town. I noticed that parents were lined up to drop their kids off at the charter school and not aware of the events that were developing. It was about 7:30 am. I started listening to the scanner on my phone and then noticed large ash was floating down from the sky. I walked over to Chris, the principal at the school and asked if he thought the kids should be dropped off? Chris was on the phone with the district office and being told they had no plans to cancel school. About then, I heard on the scanner that the fire is in Concow, one ridge over from Paradise. I communicated

that to Chris, and I was off to my jobsites. My task was to tell everyone to grab their equipment and go home if they live in town or get out of town if they didn't.

After communicating with my subcontractors, I heard on the scanner that we had a house on fire in the upper part of Paradise on the east side of town. I called my wife to tell her to pack the car, which she had already started. I called my mom. It was now about 8:30 am. I got home without too much trouble and started packing the vehicles. I walked around the exterior of my home removing flammable items and debris. It was the Fall season and leaves drop quick in high winds. I went up to help my mom load her and her belongings in my truck. She lived a few houses from ours. I brought her back to my house to finalize loading and leave. It was about 9:30 am. Both my wife and mom asked me "Why are we leaving, you never want to leave". I have experienced other fires and evacuations over the years. My answer to them both was that "this is different. Something is telling me that we can't stay here this time."

We drove through our neighborhood and hit various points of traffic as others were leaving. We saw ash and debris falling. We heard explosions in the background which turned out to be propane tanks. About 2 miles into our 13-mile journey to Chico we finally arrived on Skyway. Skyway is the main road on the west side of town and all north and southbound lanes were heading south. It was about noon. By that time the sunlight was completely gone, the sky was dark. A darkness that I had never experienced before along with heat. I felt the heat of the flames through the truck we drove. I had the AC on recirculating since the smoke was thick and it was warm in the truck.

As we made our way south, we saw houses on fire, apartments on fire and standing power poles in flames. One power pole fell across Skyway forcing all traffic to merge and go south on a

north bound lane. We saw our youngest son's neighborhood in flames and the fire dancing on the road ahead of us.

We made it to Chico around 1:30pm and had arranged in advance to meet up with our son. At this point we had no plan for housing except my son had friends to stay with. We called a friend from church and asked if he had room for myself, my wife and my mother. They said "absolutely"! We didn't know that they already had taken in three other couples.

My story is the story of tens of thousands of people who evacuated that day, in all over 50,000 people were displaced – 26,500 from Paradise, and the rest from the areas surrounding Paradise. Our residents watched their community burn as they drove through flames believing they might perish that way. Some of our residents did die in cars trying to escape. There were mothers with newborn babies evacuated from the hospital, forced to escape burning ambulances, and walk on foot, still in hospital gowns. The events of that day will never leave the memories of our residents, and it is incumbent upon me as their Mayor to tell their story and help prevent a disaster like ours from happening again.

Leading up to the Camp Fire, northern California had experienced a very long period without rainfall – more than 200 days had elapsed without significant rainfall by November 2018. This led to extremely dry, and brittle fuel conditions throughout the region. The national forest lands that surround Paradise, the Plumas and Lassen National forests were extremely dry as well and were overgrown. Inside Paradise Town limits, private property contained dense brush, and as a small Town with a single Code Enforcement Officer, defensible space was encouraged but difficult to enforce. November typically sees high winds in our region, however the winds on November 8<sup>th</sup> were particularly strong. With these conditions in place, the slightest spark could

prove catastrophic, which is exactly what happened when a poorly maintained and faulty Pacific Gas & Electric transmission line 8 miles away from Paradise in a community called Pulga failed. This failure caused enough of a spark to ignite the dry fuel nearby, which was carried at stunning speed across the 8 miles of dry, dense forest and small mountain communities to the Town of Paradise within an hour and a half.

The fire burned for 17 days before it was finally put out by our hard-working firefighters, with help from rains that finally arrived in the region. While fire retardant was not used in Paradise, winds and smoke were too much for aircraft to fly safely, it was utilized in the subsequent weeks once the fire had burned through Paradise. This action kept the fire from spreading to our neighbors Chico and Oroville.

From my perspective, more needs to be done when it comes to managing the forests that lie outside the Paradise Town limits. As the Mayor, I can work with my staff and with the residents of our community to put into action the steps that protect our community within our borders. But what I can't do is take any action to protect us from the wildfires that start in our neighboring forests. Prior to 2016 the federal government had a "hands off" approach to forest management. Federal forestry officials have said the agency's budget has been tied up reacting to fires, rather than trying to prevent them. From 1995 to 2015, the Forest Service went from spending 16% to 52% of its budget fighting fires, according to the Ecological Society of America, a non-profit.

Since 2017, the federal government has had a renewed focus on forest management. In the year that ended October 1st, 2018 the federal government thinned, cut, burned and mulched about 235,000 acres in California according to Barnie Gyant, the U.S. Forest Service's deputy regional forester for California and the Pacific. The trend towards thinning forests needs to continue.

While there were many factors that led to the Camp Fire, addressing any one of them will help lessen the severity of future fires in my community and those like it.

Once the fire was out, 17 days after it ignited, our community began the long recovery process. It took 9 months for fire debris to be removed from private property, which is much faster than we expected, to the credit of FEMA and the California Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES). We also had to address restoring power, water, communications (phone and internet), as well as removing the thousands of trees that had fallen into roadways, or across access ways that were needed for immediate response activities. We issued our first building permit in February of 2019, and since then rebuilding has not slowed down. We have rebuilt 2,300 housing units, including single family homes and multi-family units, and at any given time we have about 700 homes under construction.

It is important to note that as we rebuild, our community recognizes the importance of rebuilding stronger and better than we were before so we may be resilient to future fires or other disasters. Paradise has the unique opportunity to rebuild from the ground up and be at the forefront of resilient building to be a model for other communities who hopefully will not need to experience the devastation we did to learn what we learned. Paradise has sought out experts in resilient methods and technology to make sure we are doing all we can do. We have incorporated the Institute for Business and Home Safety (IBHS) Wildfire Prepared Home Standard into our local building codes, going a step further than the California Building Codes and the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) codes. With requirements like Class-A rated roofs, enclosed eaves, and a 5 foot non-combustible zone around the home, Paradise's building standards follow science to be as resilient as we can. We also require strict defensible space standards on individual properties, keeping weeds and brush low near homes. We not only encourage this, we require it, and inspect

every property every year to ensure compliance. In addition to individual property efforts, the Town is working with our Parks District to create buffer zones in areas along the perimeter of our community to help slow fires that enter from neighboring forests. The efforts described here have been studied by Milliman and Core Logic through a [Bay Area Council Report](#) and have been found to reduce wildfire risk by 70%.

Wildfire is a reality for Paradise and thousands of communities just like it. What has worked in the past, just isn't working anymore to keep our communities safe. That said, as Paradise has discovered, there are ways to make living in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and high fire severity zones possible with some effort on the part of residents, communities, local and state governments, and federal policy.