



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON **SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY**

Opening Statement

Ranking Member Zoe Lofgren (D-CA)

Subcommittee on Research and Technology Hearing:

Reauthorizing the U.S. Fire Administration and Fire Grant Programs: Evaluating Effectiveness and Preparedness for Modern Challenges

May 11, 2023

Thank you, Chairman Collins and Ranking Member Stevens, for holding today's hearing. And thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

While many aspects of our daily lives have returned to normal, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a heavy toll on our first responders, especially our firefighters. During the public health crisis, we relied more than ever on our nation's fire service to provide emergency medical response. We asked firefighters to be healthcare workers and risk their own exposure to a deadly disease, often with limited access to personal protective equipment.

Congress initially provided \$100 million in the CARES Act for supplemental funding to the Assistance to Firefighters Grant, or AFG. The House also passed the Heroes Act, which proposed an additional \$1 billion in supplemental funding for the AFG program and its partner program, the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response, or SAFER program. However, the Senate failed to act.

In part due to this inaction, we have seen many firefighters retire in large numbers during the pandemic and relatively few rise to fill their roles. In my home state of California, between 2019 and 2021, the U.S. Forest Service, which is the federal government's primary wildfire agency, lost more than 1000 firefighters. This number represents 20 percent of the agency's firefighting force in California. Officials with the Forest Service said the pandemic and firefighter burnout both contributed to this workforce shortage.

Demands on our fire service have only continued to increase. I have seen firsthand how increasingly dangerous wildfires threaten the health and safety of communities across California. Last year, I worked to pass four bills out of the House that would make sure federal firefighters get the overtime they deserve, improve FEMA's response to wildfires, support crucial scientific research to better predict and prepare for wildfires, and support state and local governments that have faced repeat wildfires and other disasters. Unfortunately, the Senate again failed to act.

It is my hope that Congress can rise to the challenge this year to get our nation's firefighters the resources they need to do their jobs and to support our state and local officials in the fight against wildfires. Congress must reauthorize the U.S. Fire Administration and the AFG and SAFER programs to train more firefighters and modernize our data systems used to track and respond to fire emergencies. Congress must pass legislation to enact a whole-of-government response to increasingly severe and

destructive wildfires. Congress must act, because failure to do so will put the lives and property of millions of Americans at risk.

I look forward to today's discussion on reauthorizing the U.S. Fire Administration and fire grant programs, and how Congress can help ensure the brave women and men of our Nation's fire service have the resources they need.

I yield back.