



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS

October 31, 2013

Honorable Barack H. Obama
President of the United States
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

One of the biggest threats impacting the safety of our communities and citizens is the increasing frequency and intensity of wild land fires.

There are multiple factors contributing to this growing problem. Changes in climate, growing population and development into areas that were once simply forests have exponentially increased the potential for loss of life and property. The 24 hour news cycle and new means of instant, digital communication highlight the seemingly endless destruction caused by wild fires.

Today, more than 70,000 communities located in 220 million acres with 46 million homes and 120 million people live and recreation in areas that are at high risk for wild land fires. The land area is twice the size of California and almost 40 percent our of nation's population is considered vulnerable to wild fires.

The statistics are staggering from 2003-2012. In excess of 17,000,000 acres have been scorched by 340,404 wild fires. Collectively, these fires have claimed the lives of over 300 civilians and fire fighters, destroyed over 34,000 homes and resulted in insurance claims topping \$70 billion dollars.

Recent events like California's Rim Fire which destroyed 257,000 acres and imperiled the water supply of San Francisco and surrounding areas, the Black Forest Fire, which is the most destructive in Colorado's history and the Yarnell Hill Fire outside of Prescott which claimed the lives of 19 IAFF members who were part of an elite "hot shot" crew graphically illustrate the devastation caused by these fires.

The problem is expected to mushroom in the coming years. Currently, only 14 percent of the wild land urban interface (WUI) has been developed. Consequently, people hoping to escape urban areas and find tranquility in rural America will move into the WUI. A recent study by the Harvard School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, commissioned by the EPA, NASA and NIH, concluded that the number of wild land fires will triple by 2050 and the wild land fire season will increase by three additional weeks per year.

Currently, federal, state and local governments spend in excess of \$4.5 billion annually to battle these fires. The cost of battling these blazes will certainly increase.

Fortunately, fire fighters, foresters, community planners, code enforcement officials, homebuilders, residents and elected officials at all levels of government and other stakeholders understand that we need to protect against this threat to life and property.

Through better community planning, stronger land use and building codes, fuel management, better fire prevention and planning coupled with increased cooperation between fire fighter assets at all levels of government the loss of life and property can be greatly reduced.

Regrettably, this issue has never been addressed in a comprehensive fashion with all stakeholders at the table. Several federal agencies are partnering in the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Strategy initiative, the state of

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California conducted its own Blue Ribbon Task Force, and the International Code Council attempted to bring all parties together for a summit to discuss the global issues and potential solutions to the wild land fire/WUI problem. However, all efforts to date have been piecemeal or limited in scope.

With over a dozen federal agencies involved in various components of wild land issues, almost every state government and their constituent agencies, local governments, response agencies, public works, hospitals, insurance companies, code enforcement agencies and officials, homebuilders and many other entities, drawing the appropriate mix of participants and interests is a daunting task.

It is the view of the International Association of Fire Fighters that the only way to convene and assemble such a diverse group is under the auspices of the federal government.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, America's cities were blighted by an epidemic of arson and fire deaths. To address this crisis, President Nixon appointed a large and diverse group to study and make recommendations on the problem of urban fire loss. In 1973, the National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control issued its landmark report "**America Burning.**" Over forty years later, the fire service community recognizes the lasting impact of the document and its conclusions and recommendations are frequently cited.

Today's issues and challenges surrounding wild land fires are analogous to the issues surrounding urban fire problems of the previous generation. To address adequately the wild land/WUI issues, the federal government must take a lead role in coordinating and leading the effort.

The IAFF encourages you to appoint a Task Force modeled after the **America Burning** effort to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the issues associated with wild land fires and make appropriate recommendations to address those issues.

We stand ready to assist in any way and thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,



Harold A. Schaitberger
General President

Cc: Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Vice President
Honorable Thomas Vilsack, Secretary of Agriculture
Honorable Sally Jewell, Secretary of Interior
Honorable Rand Beers, Acting Secretary of Department of Homeland Security
Honorable John McCain, Senate Co-Chair Congressional Fire Services Caucus
Honorable Susan Collins, Senate Co-Chair Congressional Fire Services Caucus
Honorable Tom Carper, Senate Co-Chair Congressional Fire Services Caucus
Honorable Jon Tester, Senate Co-Chair Congressional Fire Services Caucus
Honorable Steny Hoyer, House Co-Chair Congressional Fire Services Caucus
Honorable Rob Andrews, House Co-Chair Congressional Fire Services Caucus
Honorable Peter King, House Co-Chair Congressional Fire Services Caucus
Honorable Dave Reichert, Co-Chair Congressional Fire Services Caucus
Chief Mark Light, International Association of Fire Chiefs
Bill Webb, Executive Director, Congressional Fire Services Institute
Dan Bailey, President, International Association of Wildland Fire
Chief Philip Stittleburg, National Volunteer Fire Council
Honorable James Shannon, National Fire Protection Association
Dominic Sims, Chief Executive Officer, International Code Council