



Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein on the Wildfires in Southern California
May 4, 2004

“Today, there are six wildfires burning in Southern California, which have already consumed more than 16,000 acres. This signals an early start to the fire season, which could develop into one of the worst in history.

First of all, I understand that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has already authorized firefighting funds to help California fight the Eagle and Cerritos fires burning in Riverside County. I am grateful for FEMA’s quick decision, and I hope that these fires can be brought under control soon.

Second, in light of the early start to the fire season, I am deeply concerned that the money appropriated by Congress last year to confront the fire threat is not making its way to the communities that need funding most.

Last year, Congress appropriated \$240 million specifically to remove dead and dying trees in Southern California. This includes:

- \$150 million for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (part of USDA), \$120 million of which was designated for removal of trees killed by drought and bark beetle and erosion control; and
- \$90 million for a U.S. Forest Service program to remove dead and dying trees from federal lands and nearby private land.

I have received a report from the Natural Resources Conservation Service indicating that thus far none of the \$120 million designated for tree removal in San Bernardino, Riverside, and San Diego counties has been spent, and only a total of \$10 million will be spent in 2004. An additional \$110 million is scheduled to be spent from 2005 to 2007.

Additionally, the U.S. Forest Service has indicated that only \$4.6 million out of \$47.9 million has been obligated for fuels reduction projects on state and private land, and \$8.25 million out of \$44.3 million for projects primarily on federal land.

This is unacceptable. Southern California faces a serious fire emergency, and thousands of homes and businesses could go up in smoke in a major firestorm, like the ones that occurred last summer. In some Southern California forests, up to 80 percent of trees are dead or dying as a result of bark beetle damage. This represents a major threat, which needs to be addressed now.

I understand that the national Natural Resources Conservation Service office has indicated that the primary cause of this delay is the difficulty of obtaining a 25 percent match from local counties. The Forest Service has also found that the need to provide a local match has delayed the disbursement of funds.

It is my intention to look at the regulations governing these agencies and explore whether we can waive the 25 percent match requirement. I will also look for other ways to ensure that these funds can be distributed faster so that hazardous fuels can be eliminated as quickly as possible.

Last, local fire fighting units and federal firefighters must have the proper equipment and sufficient resources to do their jobs.

Residents of fire prone areas must also take steps to protect their homes and businesses by clearing brush and trees near their property, preparing and rehearsing evacuation plans, and participating in Fire Safe Councils and local planning and prevention meetings.

And local, state and federal agencies must review, and where appropriate, act upon the recommendations made after the fall fires.

Taken together, these steps can help avert another disastrous fire season.

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