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Assembly Committee on Emergency Management

Assembly Committee on Housing and Community Development

Assembly Committee on Economic Development, Growth, and Household Impact

JOINT OVERSIGHT HEARING

Recovering and Rebuilding after the Los Angeles Wildfires

February 26, 2025

Purpose of today's hearing:

Given the unprecedented scale and scope of the Los Angeles Firestorms in January of 2025, the Legislature moved swiftly to provide \$2.5 billion in state funding for wildfire response and recovery, accelerate planning for rebuilding damaged schools, and expedite building inspections and permits for rebuilding residences. This hearing will provide members with an opportunity to hear from the local, state and philanthropic entities coordinating and contributing to the overall housing and economic recovery efforts in Los Angeles and identify additional legislative policy that would assist the communities that were impacted the most by these wildfires.

Today's hearing is the first in a series of hearings being led by the Assembly Committee on Emergency Management. Subsequent hearings will focus on wildfire mitigation, pre-positioning of mutual aid resources, alerts and warnings, and other response activities. Additional hearings may be convened to examine lessons learned in after-action reports, investigations and what those findings may mean to California's overall preparedness for major, simultaneous disasters.

Today, the Assembly Committee on Emergency Management, the Assembly Committee on Housing and Community Development, and the Assembly Committee on Economic Development, Growth, and Housing Impact will focus on the actions being taken at all levels of government to help individuals, business and communities quickly recover and rebuild from the devastating wildfires in the Los Angeles area.

Policy considerations for the Legislature:

Who is leading the recovery and rebuilding efforts in the Palisades and Altadena?

What are the local recovery and rebuilding priorities and how can the Legislature best support these?

How can the Legislature help expedite recovery and rebuilding efforts?

Policy Considerations for the Legislature (cont.):

Does California need a stronger strategy for post-disaster housing and/or benefit from engaging in a pre-disaster housing planning?

How are communities assessing unmet needs? How can we make sure these unmet needs are identified quickly and comprehensively?

What role do community organizations, non-profits, or local government agencies play in helping small businesses access capital after a disaster?

How can small businesses with limited credit histories or poor credit scores improve their chances of securing post-disaster financing?

What are the long-term financial challenges for small businesses recovering from a disaster, and how can businesses plan for future crises to ensure continued access to capital?

How are we measuring the effectiveness and equitableness of our disaster recovery efforts?

Should California establish an individual assistance program to help disaster survivors left behind by FEMA and the state?

Should California have a more robust small business assistance program?

To what extent are California Disaster Assistance Act funds being used to fill unmet, local needs?

How are the state and locals meeting the needs of older adults and people with access and functional needs who have experienced loss due to the Los Angeles wildfires?

Should the Legislature extend regulatory relief and disaster assistance to the survivors of the Franklin Fire and other recent disasters?

To what extent should the Legislature codify the Governor's Executive Orders issued in response to the January 2025 Los Angeles Firestorms?

How is the \$2.5 billion in relief to support response and recovery efforts for Los Angeles being spent?

BACKGROUND

January 2025 Firestorms in Los Angeles: The Santa Ana winds are known for ushering in hot, dry, desert-like conditions. The Santa Anas arrive in the fall, peak in December, and dissipate in the spring. On January 2, 2025, the Los Angeles National Weather Service (NWS) Los Angeles began issuing warnings of “strong to moderate” Santa Ana high winds and “potential fire weather risk” across Southern California from January 7-9th.

These advisories were reminiscent of the NWS advisories issued prior to the Franklin Fire, which erupted on December 9, 2024 and quickly grew to over 4,000 acres. It prompted evacuation orders, warnings, road closures and school closures in the area. In total, the fire destroyed 20 structures and damaged 28 others, according to CAL FIRE. Unfortunately, the Franklin Fire was a harbinger.

On January 5, 2025, the NWS Service Los Angeles warns of widespread damaging winds and extreme fire weather conditions, noting that scattered downed trees and power outages are likely, in addition to rapid fire growth and extreme behavior with any fire starts beginning in the afternoon of Tuesday, January 7.

Due to these warnings, the Governor's Office of Emergency Services announces the pre-positioning of a total of 65 fire engines, eight water tenders, eight helicopters, 9 dozers that have been proactively placed across seven counties. The deployment also includes more than 100 specialized personnel including hand crews, dispatchers and Incident Management Team (IMT) members.¹

On January 6, 2025, the NWS Los Angeles warns, "HEADS UP!!! A LIFE-THREATENING, DESTRUCTIVE, Widespread Windstorm is expected" and the NWS Los Angeles/Oxnard issues an alert stating, "Strong winds are coming. This is a Particularly Dangerous Situation – other words, this is about as bad as it gets in terms of fire weather."

Palisades and Eaton Fires

As a result of the day-long red flag warning, the Los Angeles Fire Department pre-deploys and pre-positions resources, including fire engines, command teams, brush patrols, water tenders and air operations personnel at 8:00am. Thirty minutes later, a hiker near the source of the Palisades Fire reports smelling smoke. At 10:20am, an AlertCalifornia wildfire detection camera, detects smoke rising. CAL FIRE reports the Palisades Fire has started southeast of Palisades Drive in the Pacific Palisades at 10:30am. The Palisades Fire erupts, growing from 10 to 200 acres within a half hour and prompting evacuation warnings and orders.

Governor Gavin Newsom proclaimed a State of Emergency in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties due to fire and windstorm conditions. The Palisades Fire has grown to 1,200 acres at the time of his declaration.² By 2:30pm, the Palisades Fire has spread to 700 acres and is making a run towards the Pacific Coast Highway. According to the Los Angeles Fire Department, 10,000 houses are threatened and there are 250 city firefighters on scene in addition to 100 Los Angeles County Fire Department Firefighters deployed to assist. Extreme fire behavior, including short and long-range spotting, continues to challenge firefighting efforts for the Palisades Fire. CAL FIRE Incident Management Team II is activated to assist Los Angeles County Fire and Los

¹ <https://news.caloes.ca.gov/cal-oes-prepositions-resources-in-southern-california-in-advance-of-forecasted-fire-weather-conditions/>

² <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2025/01/07/governor-newsom-proclaims-state-of-emergency-meets-with-first-responders-in-pacific-palisades-amid-dangerous-fire-weather/>

Angeles City Fire Departments as winds gust up to 60 mph and the fire grows to 1,262 acres by 4:00pm.³

At 6:18pm, CAL FIRE reports the Eaton Fire has begun in Altadena, describing the incident as a "fast-moving fire burning brush fueled by high winds," prompting evacuation orders.⁴ Given the dire conditions of simultaneous conflagrations, the Los Angeles Fire Department calls on all of its firefighters to report for duty and the LA County Fire Department's incident commander orders 10 strike teams (50 engines) to help contain the Eaton Fire.

Full Containment:

At its height, the fires placed an estimated 331,335 people on an evacuation advisory, with nearly 192,000 residents facing mandatory evacuation and roughly 140,000 subject to warnings. The blazes burned a combined 37,469 acres and leveled entire communities in the Pacific Palisades and Altadena neighborhoods of LA County.

The Eaton Fire became the second most destructive fire in California history after destroying 9,418 buildings. The Palisades Fire is the third most destructive fire in state history with 6,837 structures destroyed. As firefighters were battling the largest conflagrations, additional fires broke out in the Los Angeles area. Crews were able to stop the forward spread and contain the blazes. These fires included the Lidia, Archer, Woodley, Sunset, Kenneth, Hurst and Auto fires, which burned close to 2,400 acres between them.

Two weeks after the initial fires, the Hughes Fire began near Castaic Lake in northern Los Angeles County on January 22 and quickly grew to over 10,000 acres. It was fully contained on January 30 after covering 10,425 acres.

After the wildfires were fully contained, LA City inspectors assessed more than 15,000 structures in the Palisades. Once these inspections were completed, the focus shifted to ensuring hazardous debris is safely removed. This process is currently underway with the help of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Army Corps of Engineers.

Major Presidential Disaster Declaration:

On January 8, 2025, President Biden approves a Major Disaster Declaration for California, which makes federal disaster assistance to supplement recovery efforts in the areas affected by wildfires and straight-line winds from Jan. 7, 2025 through January 31, 2025.

The President's action makes federal funding available to affected individuals in Los Angeles County. Assistance can include grants for temporary housing and home repairs, low-cost loans to cover uninsured property losses and other programs to help individuals and business owners recover from the effects of the disaster. Federal funding is also available to state, tribal and eligible local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations on a cost-sharing basis for debris removal and emergency protective measures, including direct federal assistance.

³ <https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/2025/1/7/palisades-fire/updates/b5ee529b-be05-4c4a-8892-5463128f2c1d>

⁴ <https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/2025/1/7/eaton-fire/updates/35f4cb4c-4023-4484-a7b2-d0c2a40a5880>

Disasters and Housing:

Disasters compound existing housing market challenges. Constrained housing supply has led to increased housing cost burdens, especially among populations vulnerable to disaster. A myriad of recovery assistance programs and timelines, and restrictions on what disasters qualify for support coalesce with these steady state challenges to slow community housing recovery efforts.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is responsible for interim housing recovery efforts, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is responsible for those long-term recovery efforts that may extend over several years. At the state level, housing development agencies are working to address housing challenges as a normal course of action.

Governor Newsom's Executive Orders to Expedite Rebuilding in Los Angeles

Governor Newsom has issued four Executive Orders intended to help the Los Angeles region rebuild permanent housing quickly, by minimizing regulatory barriers and bureaucratic processes, while implementing measures related to temporary housing for those whose homes were damaged or destroyed in the devastating Eaton and Palisades fires. These Executive Orders did the following:

Pertaining to state and local permitting requirements:

- Suspended the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) review and California Coastal Act permitting requirements for the reconstruction of damaged or destroyed properties for the following:
 - Primary structures that are in substantially the same location as, and do not exceed 110% of the footprint and height of, the original primary structures that existed immediately before the emergency;
 - Accessory structures that are in substantially the same location as, and do not exceed 100% of the footprint and height of, the original accessory structures that previously existed;
 - New accessory dwelling units (ADUs) on a residential property on which a primary residence was substantially destroyed, but only to the extent that such ADUs are built at least 10 feet from a canyon bluff or 25 feet from a coastal bluff; and,
 - Supportive infrastructure that is necessary to construct and install all of the above structures.
- Suspended the provisions of the California Coastal Act requiring coastal development permits for the establishment, repair, or operation of a mobilehome park or special occupancy park, as well as the replacement, installation, or repair of one or more mobilehomes, manufactured homes, or recreational vehicles on privately-owned land.

- Extended from one year to three years time that a person has to start work on a building permit issued for a project to repair, restore, demolish, or replace a structure or facility in LA County that was substantially damaged or destroyed in the disasters.
- Extended all coastal development permits issued under the California Coastal Act for an additional 3 years for projects involving properties or facilities that were damaged or destroyed.

Pertaining to building standards:

- Allowed homes in LA County that were originally designed and constructed to the 2019 California Building Standards Code and were destroyed in the disasters to be rebuilt using the same design that met the 2019 codes at the discretion of the local government, rather than having to be redesigned to meet newer building codes.
- Directed various state agencies with authority over building standards to provide a report to the Governor within 60 days that includes recommendations regarding any provision of the building codes that should be suspended for rebuilding structures.

Pertaining to the actions of state agencies and departments:

- Required the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD), the Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation, the Office of Emergency Services, and the Department of General Services (DGS) to provide the Governor with a report identifying other state permitting requirements that may unduly impede efforts to rebuild properties or facilities destroyed that should be considered for suspension, and to update that report every 60 days.
- Required HCD to coordinate with local governments to identify and recommend procedures, including but not limited to exploring the use of pre-approved plans and waivers of certain permitting requirements, to establish rapid permitting and approval processes to expedite the reconstruction or replacement of residential properties destroyed or damaged by fire.
- Prohibited the California Coastal Commission from taking any action that interferes with the executive order related to California Coastal Act permitting.
- Committed to collaborating with the Legislature to identify and propose statutory amendments that durably address barriers impeding rapid rebuilding efforts in the areas affected by this emergency.

Pertaining to the facilitation of temporary and emergency housing for displaced residents:

- Suspended any local ordinances and state laws or regulations that would normally prohibit an individual from residing in a manufactured home, mobilehome, or recreational vehicle (RV) on a private lot outside of a mobilehome or special occupancy park during the reconstruction or repair of any home damaged or destroyed by the disasters, for three years or until the suspension is terminated.

- Allowed the placement and holding out for lease or rent of mobilehomes or RVs on public or private property to displaced survivors in LA County without having to comply with certain provisions of the Mobilehome Parks Act or Special Occupancy Parks Act, and suspended several planning and zoning requirements for such mobilehomes or RVs.
- Suspended the collection of various fees for mobilehome and special occupancy parks in LA County if the parks are providing housing to displaced survivors, for three years or until the suspension is terminated.

Governor Newsom requests nearly \$40 billion in federal funding for disaster recovery

On February 21, 2025, in an effort to address the immediate and long-term recovery needs following the January 2025 wildfires in Los Angeles, Governor Newsom requested nearly \$40 billion in federal funding from Congress. This letter outlines the urgent need for financial assistance for business, tax incentives, community, private property, and workforce recovery as well as wildfire resilience. The specific requests and dollar amounts include:

Business Recovery

- Business Loans: \$5.29 billion (SBA Disaster Loan Assistance Program)
- Business Grants: \$4.32 billion (Economic Development Administration grants)

Tax Incentivized Recovery

- Low-Income Housing Tax Credit: \$200 million increase (supporting 6,500 new affordable units)
- Tax Relief Measures: Various provisions, including casualty loss deductions and penalty-free retirement fund access

Community and Private Property Recovery

- Public Assistance: \$16.8 billion (FEMA funding for debris removal, infrastructure, schools, and healthcare facilities)
- Housing & Business Recovery: \$9.9 billion (HUD CDBG-DR funding for housing and infrastructure rebuilding)
- Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program: \$36.25 million (heating/cooling support for low-income households)
- Community Services Block Grant: \$12.89 million (economic stability and recovery assistance)
- Child Welfare Grants: \$1 million (support for foster children and families)
- Social Services Block Grant: \$1.5 million (support for vulnerable populations and crisis response)
- Water Infrastructure: \$432.3 million (drinking water system repairs)

- Brownfields Cleanup: \$5 million (environmental cleanup and redevelopment)
- Air Quality Monitoring: \$2 million (toxic air pollutant monitoring)
- Transportation Infrastructure: \$101 million (repair of highways)

Workforce Recovery

- Displaced Workers: \$50 million (National Dislocated Worker Grant for temporary jobs)
- Unemployment: \$1 million (Disaster Unemployment Assistance Program)
- Childcare & Health Services: \$375.8 million (childcare facility repairs, mental health support, and behavioral health)

Wildfire Resilience

- Federal Lands Recovery & Wildfire Mitigation: \$350 million (U.S. Forest Service efforts, vegetation management)
- Mapping & Modeling: \$2 million (USGS landslide hazard assessment and early warning system)

Disaster response and recovery: Cal OES serves as the state’s leadership hub during all major emergencies and disasters. This includes responding, directing, and coordinating local, state and federal resources and mutual aid assets across all regions to support the diverse communities across the state. Cal OES also is responsible for developing and maintaining the State Emergency Plan (SEP) and the Disaster Recovery Framework. Cal OES serves as the state’s overall coordinator and agent to secure federal government resources through the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Cal OES also administers the California Disaster Assistance Acts funds and several federal emergency preparedness grant programs.

The California Department of Housing and Community Development also plays a critical role in the longer-term recovery process as they manage the US Department Housing and Urban Development’s Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) program, which are primarily intended to assist housing recovery and to benefit low and moderate income households impacted by disasters.

Disaster Recovery Centers and Disaster Case Management:

By January 14, FEMA established two, initial disaster recovery centers to provide resources for Los Angeles County residents affected by the January wildfires. The centers included representatives of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which had been offering assistance previously at eight Los Angeles County libraries. Those services will now be located at the two new Disaster Recovery Centers. As of Jan. 27, nearly 112,000 FEMA applications had been submitted, but only about 19,000 of them were approved for Individual Assistance, according to the agency.

As in other disasters, disaster case managers take on the crucial role of connecting impacted individuals and businesses with assistance, as one of the first steps in recovery is finding all the

impacted people, homeowners, renters, small business owners, and people who lost work, to let them know what types of disaster assistance is available, such as FEMA individual assistance, Small Business Administration loans, debris removal and the LA Region Small Business Relief Fund.

Debris Removal:

On January 12, Governor Newsom issued an executive order to direct fast action on debris removal work and mitigate the potential for mudslides and flooding in areas burned.⁵ With much of the winter still ahead, the risk of rainstorms creating new catastrophes in these areas remains high. At the direction of the Governor, the work to prepare for potential mudslides and flooding begins immediately.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimates that 4,250,000 tons of structural ash, metal, debris, soil and foundations will be removed during this event. This total does not include vehicles or damaged trees. The consolidated Debris Removal Program resulting from the LA County Wildfires in January 2025 is a two-phase process:

Phase 1 of Los Angeles County's Debris Removal Program was led by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA), which removes common household items burned in the wildfires that may require safe disposal. As fire-scarred houses are cleared, common household items are removed by the U.S. EPA to help clear properties in preparation for rebuilding. These items are the type of common everyday materials that residents transport to designated collection facilities for proper disposal. A U.S. EPA team surveys property, identifying debris and marking it for disposal. Then, a second team will secure the loose debris in a secure receptacle and remove it. Following removal, the collected debris is taken to a transfer site nearby where it will be sorted and quickly routed on its journey to its final disposal location. Throughout this process, local, state, and federal partners will continue to work together to test air, water, and soil to ensure safety.

On February 11, Governor Newsom, along with local and federal officials announced that Phase 2- Debris Removal has officially begun. According to Gov. Gavin Newsom, this marks the fastest large scale debris removal operation in the state's history, happening just 35 days after the fires erupted. That is roughly twice as fast as the debris removal process for the 2018 Woolsey Fire.

For Phase 2 of Los Angeles County's Debris Removal Program, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was tasked to support FEMA and the Consolidated Debris Removal Program in the affected cities and communities. Objectives of this mission include 1) Reducing immediate threats to public health and safety, and 2) Expediting economic recovery of the affected cities and communities. These efforts involve the removal of ash, burned structural remains, hazardous materials, foundations, ACM, vehicles, vessels, contaminated soil and debris from private and public properties.

⁵ <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2025/01/12/with-eye-toward-l-a-s-recovery-governor-newsom-issues-executive-order-directing-fast-action-to-clear-debris-prepare-for-mudslides-and-flooding/>

Property Rights of Entry (ROEs) are required for the Corps of Engineers to conduct Phase 2 of fire debris management. Property owners deciding to “opt out” of this government program must hire their own contractors – at the owner’s expense

Recovery Operations:

In the Pacific Palisades, Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass has tapped longtime civic leader Mr. Steve Soboroff, as her disaster recovery czar. Los Angeles City has also hired Mr. James Featherstone to lead the disaster recovery group within the Los Angeles Department of Emergency Management. He will also oversee the city’s contract with the Hagerty Consulting, an Illinois- based firm that specializes in disaster response. Councilmember Traci Park is leading the LA City Council’s ad hoc committee on wildfire recovery.

On February 4, 2025, LA County Supervisor Kathryn Barger announced the formation of a commission to organize and support the long-term rebuilding efforts of fire-devastated Altadena area. Supervisor Barger will chair the group, dubbed the Altadena Recovery Commission (ARC). The panel will include Altadena community members and will advise and support the supervisor as she oversees the rebuilding of Altadena. The ARC will focus on rebuilding homes, infrastructures, supporting businesses and commercial corridors, and restoring natural habitats.

Separately, on February 18, LA County Supervisor Lindsey Horvath and UCLA Chancellor Julio Frenk announced that UCLA will provide its world-class research expertise and programmatic support to an independent commission tasked with developing policy recommendations to guide a safe and resilient recovery for Los Angeles in the wake of the 2025 wildfires.

The blue-ribbon commission will develop recommendations focused on:

- Fire-safe reconstruction: Implementing fire-resistant materials, defensible space strategies and climate-smart building standards.
- Resilient infrastructure: Undergrounding utilities, expanding water storage and conveyance, and hardening power grids.
- Faster rebuilding: Identifying resilient home designs and systems that could be pre-approved to expedite reconstruction, and offering financial incentives to support rebuilding.

Federal Disaster Assistance

Assistance Available for Self-Employed Wildfire Survivors: On February 4, 2025, FEMA announced that self-employed individuals in Los Angeles who became unemployed as a direct result of the wildfires may apply for FEMA Individual Assistance, Disaster Unemployment Assistance (DUA) and/or U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) Disaster Loans.

FEMA Individual Assistance: FEMA may be able to provide funds to repair or replace disaster-damaged tools and equipment required for your job. This help is available to a wide variety of applicants, including artists, musicians, mechanics, and many other occupations. Occupational tools are tools and equipment required for self-employment or not provided by an employer but required for employment. Examples of essential tools include: computers required by an

employer or for self-employment, technology and equipment involved in the creation of art, music, photography, etc.; tools and equipment such as power tools, tractors, plows, seeders, planters, harvesters, sprayers, hay balers, utility vehicles, lawnmowers, etc.; art materials, paint, brushes, canvas, clay, musical instruments, theatrical tools such as movable flooring, drapery, makeup, costumes as well as sound and lighting equipment; and uniforms required for work when you are responsible for replacement of the uniforms. This assistance may be available if the items were damaged by the disaster, you do not have another working item that can meet this need, and the loss of the item was not covered by insurance. The deadline to apply for FEMA Individual Assistance is March 10, 2025.

Disaster Unemployment Assistance: Los Angeles County workers impacted by the severe wildfires and winds can now apply for Disaster Unemployment Assistance (DUA) or regular unemployment benefits. The Employment Development Department (EDD) administers these benefits. DUA is for workers – such as self-employed people – who are not eligible for regular unemployment benefits and lost their jobs or had hours reduced because of the disaster. The deadline to submit a DUA application is March 10, 2025.

U.S. Small Business Administration Disaster Loans: The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), FEMA's federal partner in disaster recovery, offers low-interest disaster loans to help homeowners, renters, private non-profit organizations, and business of all sizes recover from declared disasters, Applicants may apply online and receive additional disaster assistance information at SBA.gov/disaster.