

**Testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
Chairman Dianne Feinstein**

5/26/2010

Chairman Feinstein, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the challenges facing our wildland firefighters. These brave men and women perform vital, difficult work for long hours in dangerous conditions. We depend on them to protect our families, our homes and our forests, and they dedicate their time and sometimes their lives to that calling. Many of our firefighters have served for decades, developing the expertise needed to fight an unpredictable and resilient foe. I honor their service, and I hope that this hearing can help us provide them with the resources and support that they need to do their jobs in the safest and most effective way possible.

As the Chairman knows well, last summer the Station Fire ravaged the Angeles National Forest, burning 160,000 acres over 50 days and threatening thousands of homes in my District and several adjacent districts. Almost all of the fire was contained to the National Forest, but, as usual, local, state and federal fire agencies across the region provided equipment and hundreds of firefighters to the effort. Two members of the Los Angeles County Fire Department, Captain Ted Hall and

Firefighter Specialist Arnie Quinones, tragically lost their lives fighting the fire. In addition, the Station Fire effort cost almost \$100 million, a significant fraction of the Forest Service firefighting budget for the year. And because of its proximity to a major metropolitan area and its incredible expense, the fire illustrated many of the problems our firefighters face in the field, and why wildland firefighting has become increasingly expensive.

There were a couple of hundred fires in the Angeles Forest last year. Almost all of them were attacked and contained within 24 hours. Unfortunately, two fires escaped initial attack and spread across thousands of acres. Those two fires alone ate up much of the Angeles firefighting budget and caused almost all of the fire damage last year. Fire officials agree that the most important part of fighting fires is often the initial attack, which, if successful, keeps fires smaller, cheaper and much safer for residents and firefighters.

In this respect, fighting fires is like health care, where early detection and aggressive action can prevent the need for long, painful and expensive care later. The cost and safety-conscious approach to fighting wildfire is to contain the fire early by making the initial attack as aggressively as possible, using as many firefighters and aircraft as

possible, so that the hugely greater resources that are required to fight a massive fire are rarely needed.

The Station Fire was attacked promptly and aggressively by U.S. Forest Service and LA County Fire Department firefighters on the afternoon of Wednesday, August 26, 2009. Handcrews, engines and aircraft fought the fire until evening, when some resources were released. One night-flying helicopter, owned by LA County Fire Department was dispatched to the fire but was quickly diverted to perform its other responsibility—medical evacuation.

During the night, several hotspots developed in areas inaccessible to ground crews due to steep terrain and thick vegetation. The incident commander ordered aircraft for the next morning, to arrive at 7 a.m. Unfortunately, possibly due to limited resources and safety requirements for rest hours, the airtankers did not arrive until around 9 a.m. In the early hours, right after sunrise, the inaccessible hotspots flared up and threatened the road that firefighters were using to reach the fire, forcing a retreat, and the failure of the initial attack. As a post-action report from the LA County Fire Department stated: “[n]o one, no fire chief, no firefighter, resident or reporter can provide definitive evidence that anything would have made a difference in the outcome. Still we must

look hard at every action. We must question and we must make changes where we can.”

One possible change is to equip the Forest Service with the capability to fly helicopters at night. There are night-flying helicopters in the Los Angeles area, but very few, and in the case of the Station Fire, they were unavailable for at least some portion of the crucial first night. If the Forest Service had a dedicated night-flying capability, it would dramatically increase night-flying firefighting capacity in the region.

Using night-vision goggles, the Forest Service operated night-flying firefighting helicopters on the Angeles National Forest during the 1970s. An accident in the late 70s caused many to question whether the risks of night flights were worth the rewards, and by the early 80s, the program had ended. The Forest Service and its contractors no longer have the training or equipment to fly at night.

However, the technology to enable night flying has developed dramatically in the three decades since. Military contractors have built modern night-flying systems for use by our forces overseas, and many of those technologies are now being developed for civilian use. In addition, many have concluded that much of the risk could be removed by operational changes that minimize the possibility of collisions in the two

areas of greatest traffic and greatest risk—over the fire and during landing and take-off.

In addition, a rapidly expanding urban-forest interface, modern, more-effective firefighting techniques, and a better understanding of the importance of early attack all mean that the need for night flights has dramatically increased since the 1970s.

The Forest Service must study this issue again, taking into account the increased need for aggressive firefighting techniques, as well as improved technology, which minimizes the risk to firefighter safety. I believe that if they do so, they will conclude that this is a capability they should once again acquire and deploy. Night-time flights are not a silver bullet, but they can significantly improve our ability to effectively fight fires near urban areas, and by helping reduce the number of catastrophic fires, they may save lives and pay for themselves.

The Angeles National Forest, like other forests across the country, has a rapidly growing urban area on its doorstep. Fires that start in the Forest and burn through remote, inaccessible areas can now threaten tens of thousands of people. The Forest Service employees and firefighters work hard to protect those people, but they are fighting an ever-more-difficult battle. We must be sure that we are providing them everything

they need to fight fires in the safest, most cost-effective and most efficient way possible.

Chairman Feinstein, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee.