

**COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT, INVESTIGATIONS &
MANAGEMENT**

**Hearing: “Texas Wildfire Review: Did Bureaucracy Prevent a Timely
Response?”**

**10 A.M., Monday, October 17, 2011
Texas State Capitol Building, Austin, Texas**

Ranking Member Henry Cuellar (D-TX) Opening Statement

I would first like to thank Chairman McCaul for convening this hearing in our home state. Chairman McCaul and I work together on a bipartisan basis on numerous issues facing Texas.

Last week we co-sponsored legislation and participated in a hearing held in this Subcommittee on Texas border security issues.

This week I am pleased to join forces with him to address another issue of vital concern to Texans: the Texas wildfires that even now, are burning in our state.

The purpose of this hearing is examine the impact of these tragic wildfires and determine what steps can be taken to improve the process for receiving disaster assistance.

I would like to thank all of the witnesses for participating in this morning’s hearing.

As we convene here today, my thoughts and prayers are with those who have lost their lives during this tragic wildfire season.

They also go out to those who have lost their residences, their livelihoods and who have in any way been affected by the wildfires.

I would also like to thank and express my appreciation for the brave men and women who have worked around the clock since the fires began to protect the lives and property of our fellow Texans.

Since late August, a record 3.8 million acres – an area roughly the size of Connecticut – has burned and continues to burn, even as we meet here right now.

In fact, almost half of all acreage burned in the United States in 2011 was burned in Texas.

Just yesterday, the Texas Forest Service responded to four fires occurring over seven acres and 230 of the 254 Texas counties reported burn bans.

In the past seven days alone, the Texas Forest Service has responded to 40 fires over 1,456 acres and fire departments reported 37 fires over 77 acres.

With over 1,300 homes destroyed, 5,000 people displaced and possibly up to \$5 billion in damages to our state’s agricultural industry, wildfires have once again shown that they are a deadly threat to people living Texas.

That’s the bad news. The good news is that, in addition to State and local aid, federal assistance is now underway.

In less than five weeks since the last Presidential disaster declaration for Texas wildfires, federal assistance has topped \$16.4 million.

Moreover, since September 30th over 3,000 wildfire survivors across 23 counties have registered with the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA).

With any large-scale disaster, such as what we are experiencing in Texas, proper planning and preparedness is vital.

We must ensure before a catastrophe hits that there is coordination at all levels of government.

I am pleased to see that representatives from the Federal, State and local level will testify before us today.

I am interested in hearing firsthand how these separate and distinct agencies have come together to respond to this devastating event.

And to the extent that there is red tape that serves as a barrier to response and recovery, we must address it now.

It is important to note that the Stafford Act, which governs disaster response, recognizes that States and local communities, not the Federal Government, have the primary responsibility to address disasters and emergencies.

The Federal Government, when called upon, acts to supplement these efforts and provide resources to States, local and tribal governments, when their resources are exhausted.

Prior to my service as the Ranking Member of the Committee's Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security, I served as the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness, and Response.

In that capacity, I had direct oversight of FEMA and had an opportunity to become thoroughly familiar with its operations and response capabilities.

I also saw firsthand the challenges faced by large-scale response efforts.

I therefore have an appreciation for how multiple moving parts must work together on the Federal, State and local level to formulate a response that is effective, timely, and serves the needs of those affected by the disaster.

Federal disaster declarations for wildfires are extremely rare, yet, this year, President Obama has issued two declarations in response to Texas wildfires.

Hopefully, these disaster declarations can provide Texas with the federal assistance it needs as it continues to fight uncontrolled fires and assist those in need.

We can argue over when the declaration was signed or focus on the fact that money is now flowing to the state and Texans are receiving much needed housing, food, and financial assistance.

The current wildfires, as horrendous as they are, can provide us with a unique teaching moment to help us learn to better prepare for and respond to catastrophic disasters in this State and beyond.