

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2021

Remarks During a Briefing on Wildfires With Federal and State Fire Agency Officials in Mather, California

September 13, 2021

Governor Gavin C. Newsom of California. All right, well, let me—Mr. President, let me welcome you. And I was joking with the President. I said this has been my office pretty much the last 18 months, with COVID and all these wildfires.

[At this point, Gov. Newsom continued his remarks, concluding as follows.]

And I'll just end on this, Mr. President: This fire season is just getting going. I'll remind you we lost Paradise in 2018, the second week of November. In 2017, we had one of the largest wildfires in history, in December. We are barely out of August, in the first few weeks now of September.

So we're really humbled and gratified by your support and leadership, and we welcome you here at OES.

The President. Well, you all are the best. That's not hyperbole. You know, I used to always—as the Governor probably heard from the United States Senators here, I always got kidded when I was a Senator all those years because I'd always quote Irish poets. *[Laughter]* And they thought I did it because I was Irish. *[Laughter]* I did it because they're the best poets in the world. *[Laughter]* But there's a famous line of a poem written by Seamus Heaney. He said: "All's changed, changed utterly. A terrible beauty has been born."

By the way, you don't have to stand for me. Sit. *[Laughter]*

And the truth is, all has changed. It's changed in a way that it's never going go back to what it was 10, 15 years ago. It's simply not the case.

When I became President, I committed I'd rejoin an outfit I helped put together, and that was the Paris accord. And things have changed so significantly; I mean that. This is like preaching to the choir, as they say where I'm from. And you all understand it. The idea we're going to go back to a circumstance where we're going to be able to be in a situation like it was in 1960, '70, or '80, it's just not going to be the case.

But we can't afford to let anything slip further. We can't allow that to happen. All the data—and some of you are genuine experts here—all the data shows that to get it to stay below 1.5 degrees centigrade, we have to act more rapidly and more firmly and more broadly than today. It really is a matter of what the world is going to look like. Not a joke. Not a joke.

Gov, I doubt whether you or I would have ever believed that more people died in New York City, in Queens, from flooding than in a hurricane in Louisiana when I was down there with the Gov, with 178-mile-an-hour winds. More people died. They had flood stages that were up to 20 feet—people dying in basements because they've overflowed. They had tornados, so they head to the basement, and how many people got killed because they couldn't get out?

And, folks, there's so much we can do—we can do. And I think even some of my more conservative—I don't want to be flippant—some of my more less-believing friends—*[laughter]*—in this notion of global warming are, all of a sudden, having an "altar call," as they say in the southern part of Delaware. They're seeing the Lord, because they better see it quickly.

We've got to change. And we've got to not just build back, we've got to build back better than before. I noticed everyone around the world is using that expression now, but it's literal.

We're the only country in the world that has gone through crises throughout its career, through our history, and we've come out stronger than we went in. We've got to do that now. We have a chance to build back in a way that not only gets us back to where we were yesterday, but gets us to a place where we are going to be able to sustain that—sustain that position.

For example, we got bipartisan support. I know I get criticized for trying to get bipartisan support, but we got it for the legislation I wrote relating to the whole idea of infrastructure. It's real.

And what I couldn't get done in terms of climate there I was able to put into a thing called the recovery act—the Build Back Better portion of it. Whether that passes or not, exactly how much I don't know, but we're going to get it passed. And it has money in there for resilience.

For example, it costs 2,500 bucks an acre for you guys to make sure that you cleared forest floors. Well, guess what? Why can't we have a Civilian Climate Corps made up of thousands of kids—young people who are looking for jobs, getting out and being trained to do it, to build—to build back better?

Everybody knows, if we have resilience—how many times, Gov, have you had to shut down an electric transmission because of the wires coming down in the forest?

Well, we all know if we had excessive—if we had extensive battery technology and storage, it'd be a different world. We all know that if we invested in being able to run power lines underground, it'd cost a hell of a lot more money. But if we made the investment—for every dollar we invest now, we save \$6. That's not hyperbole. That is not hyperbole.

We spent over \$97 billion because of climate change, and we're sitting with our thumb in our ear, except here. You've been fighting like hell. You've been moving in a way that few States have done.

And you know, the total loss, Gov—if I think of it in terms of back East—the total loss to fires—of fires this past year are larger than the State of—*the entire State of New Jersey* in terms of distance—of size. The entire State. You all may smile about that, but New Jersey is a big State, man—*[laughter]*—and it's critically important. That's how much has been lost.

And by the way, the smoke from these fires ends up in New York, New Hampshire. It ends up—people not only worrying; you have to do it all—thank God you've got a Governor who understands there is a COVID crisis, that everybody should be vaccinated. Because guess what? Parents are not only worried now about whether their kids are going to get COVID with the Delta variant, they're worried about whether they can breathe the air.

So there's so much we can do. I really mean it, from the bottom of my heart. There's so much we can do. It's within our power to do it. Let's not lose this advantage.

I was just in the State—a neighboring State called Idaho. Idaho—*[laughter]*—when I got elected as a 29-year-old Senator, was a Republican State.

[The President made the sign of the cross.]

I don't know what the hell happened. *[Laughter]* I mean, excuse me—a Democratic State; now it's a Republican State. Frank Church, Cecil Andrus, and others were the leading Democrats.

But the Governor there is complimentary of your Governor and that we had to have mandates for vaccinations. He's getting the living hell kicked out of him by his Republican colleagues, I think, but he's—but that's what he's doing. So there's hope. There's hope.

And by the way, FEMA has done such an incredible job across the board—across the board. I was on the phone today with a guy who's not real crazy about me—the Governor of Texas—

offering him help for the coming hurricane, letting him know: "Let me know immediately what you need, when you need it. Don't wait. Don't wait."

So, folks, we have a chance. We have a chance, because of the work you're doing, to make some significant change and literally—I know it sounds like hyperbole—save a generation. Not a joke. Not a joke.

If we don't stay below 1.5 degrees centigrade, in terms of the Earth warming, we're in deep trouble, man. And it's not reversible. It's not like you can go back and start over, like go back to "Go." You can't do it.

So what you're doing matters. I think you all realize it, but if you don't realize it, you should. It's incredibly consequential.

I just basically came to say thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you for what you're doing.

[The President was brought over to view a slide presentation.]

Governor's Office of Emergency Services Director Mark S. Ghilarducci. [Inaudible]—and we're here to provide a quick briefing to you on the timeline. And you'll hear from—*[inaudible]*.

U.S. Forest Service Pacific Southwest Regional Forester Jennifer Eberlien. Thanks so much. Mr. President, it's so great to have you here. And, Governor, thank you.

I'm showing you a map right now of the Caldor Fire. So, just to orient you, this is where Grizzly Flats is at, right here. Placerville is over here. And it goes all the way up here to South Lake Tahoe.

Gov. Newsom. Yes, just to situate us and so the President knows, give him a sense of where are we—*[inaudible]*.

Regional Forester Eberlien. We are over there.

Gov. Newsom. Not too many miles away.

Regional Forester Eberlien. No. No. Not very far away.

The ignition started right here out at Omo Ranch.

Could you go the next slide, please?

[Regional Forester Eberline continued her remarks, concluding as follows.]

So, being able to work with our partners—we have a shared stewardship agreement with the State. We have Good Neighbor Authority. We are primed and ready to be able to do more, just as you had said.

Gov. Newsom. So what you're seeing is—pardon me, Mr. President—about 219,000 acres. They are about—Chief Porter will talk a little bit more—I think you're at over 67-percent contained.

Regional Forester Eberlien. Yes. We are.

Gov. Newsom. They said that this morning. But remarkably—*[inaudible]*—and just reinforcing: No fatalities. Remarkable job of evacuation. And peak—I think we're up, close to—what?—53,000 people in the State have been evacuated in some form.

Regional Forester Eberlien. Yes, yes.

Gov. Newsom. So it's just an extraordinary effort and, again, testament to this frame of partnership that's mutual—not just mutual aid, but the unified command structure, which is just world class.

Regional Forester Eberlien. I'm going to turn it over to Chief Porter.

California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection Director and Fire Chief Thom Porter. Thank you, Jen. Mr. President, thank you for coming and taking a look at this fire, but I want you to get the whole scale of what's going on as well.

[*Chief Porter continued his remarks, concluding as follows.*]

But these two fires are the first two fires that we have in recorded history that burned from the starting point on the west side of the mountains—the mountain range is about center here—all the way to the east side to the desert, basically, the High Desert.

The President. That's where I was looking. [*Inaudible*]*—mountains.*

Chief Porter. Yes. So—Bryan, if you could go back, I just want to jump back real quick here. So, Lake Tahoe—this breakpoint right here, all the water on this side of these lakes drains to the Sacramento Valley. Everything there drains down into Reno. And that's the first time we've had fire do this as well.

So these are the first two fires that have done that. In 11 months, including the time when this fire started and the Dixie was still burning, six of the seven largest fires in our history burned within an 11-month period. It's incredible what climate change is doing to us.

So, with that, I think I will pass the attention to Don Ashton.

Director Ghilarducci. He's the chief administrative officer for El Dorado County, where this fire took place.

Chief Administrative Officer Don Ashton of El Dorado County, CA. Thank you, Mr. President, for coming. Thank you, Governor.

Just a little bit about some of the damages we've been facing, what El Dorado County has faced and the Grizzly Flats area. We lost—the whole community is essentially lost—we lost a school, we lost a fire station, we lost a post office. We lost about 440 homes in that area. About 25 percent of those people don't have homeowner's insurance.

So what are we going to do?

The President. We're going to take care of them.

Chief Administrative Officer Ashton. Thank you. Thank you. And if you head up the Highway 50 corridor, we lost another 220 homes, estimated.

And then, one thing I want to reference—and Chief Porter hit on this jag here—I want to talk about this little gap right here, where it hopped over. That's the heroic efforts of our firefighters, from CAL FIRE, all the partner agencies throughout the nation, quite frankly. Those are all homes in that area. They saved—[*inaudible*].

The President. So this is the mountain ridge here?

Chief Administrative Officer Ashton. The mountain ridge is probably right here.

Participant. That's a valley.

Chief Administrative Officer Ashton. This is the valley.

The President. That's the valley. Okay.

Chief Administrative Officer Ashton. Right on the bottom of that mountain range.

The President. I gotcha. I gotcha. Okay.

Chief Administrative Officer Ashton. Hundreds of homes right there in Christmas Valley that were all saved. We didn't lose one structure in that area because of the efforts of our firefighters and the heroes they are. And then that's a testament of field management that allowed it to be controlled.

The President. Well, you know that old expression: God made man; then he made a few firefighters. *[Laughter]* But there's truth to it. Not a joke. And we don't pay firefighters. And the Federal firefighters are going to get a significant raise. I was able to, by Executive order on the Federal side, raise the salary to a minimum of \$15 an hour, which is way below, and the benefits.

But, folks, too many of you—too many of the firefighters you're working with are trying to figure out how to save their homes, number one; and number two, how to, even if they're not in harm's way, be able to pay for their mortgages, be able to pay for what they're doing. We owe them. We owe them a whole hell of a lot more. Now, I'm not just saying this. I've been involved with the fire service for the last 40 years. And I'm telling you, it's about time we heed a wakeup call.

I can't dictate—I won't attempt to dictate what States can do or don't do. But the Federal firefighters are going to get rewarded. And in return, hopefully, that puts pressure on making sure firefighters across the board get this.

I mean, Gov, I grew up in a neighborhood—a little steel town called Claymont, Delaware, where you became—and I went to a little Catholic school across from the fire hall. You became one of three things: a cop, a firefighter, or a priest. *[Laughter]* I wouldn't have qualified for any one of them.

But all kidding aside, it's—these are the folks who—I mean, and thank—and these smokejumpers. I mean, thank God we have some crazy people working with us. *[Laughter]* No, I'm serious. Think about it. Have you ever—I've been to some of these fires because I got involved with our fire companies. Have you ever, ever been to a fire where there's a house fire, where there's a place—where these guys jumping into—I got a phone call one day, Gov.

I was down doing "Meet the Press" on a Sunday. I commuted every day when I was a Senator from Delaware to Washington and back, 260 miles a day. And I was rarely down there on a Sunday, but I was doing "Meet the Press." I got a phone call: Lightning strike hit—I live on a little pond—a 10-acre pond that borders my property. Hit a conduit in the side of the hill. It went up underneath and set on fire the internal part of my house, so the air conditioning just was billowing out smoke.

My fire company came, the smoke was so thick—not a joke. And the firefighters—I mean, you could not see into the house, from the basement floor all the way to the third floor. Not a single thing. And my fire service went, and they saved my wife, and, as she says, saved the cat—*[laughter]*—and my '67 Corvette didn't burn. *[Laughter]*

But all kidding aside, what these people do—what you all do is incredible. And hopefully, I—when all of this has moved in the right direction, we begin to reward—you know, it's not any insult to law enforcement, but more firefighters are injured or die, as a percent, than police officers do. Police officers, I wouldn't take your job in a heartbeat.

But here's the deal: We've got to start to let people know—know what you do for us—so we can get the kind of support we need to make sure we continue to have this capacity. Because we're going to wear people out. We're going to wear it out because it's not going to be over for a while.

So anyway, I just want to say thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you to the firefighters and law enforcement. A very hard job.

Director Ghilarducci. [*Inaudible*]*—wrap up this briefing by just saying that this whole context of climate change is really having an impact to a State like California. Since 2015, we've had back-to-back-to-back—[inaudible]—wildfires. We're talking about wildfires like this that have taken out whole communities.*

In 2017 to 2020 alone, we've lost 50,000 homes by wildfire in this State. That's in the State that's got less than 2-percent vacancy rate. These are rural communities as a whole. These are people who live in these communities. It's an equity issue. They don't have the services. We lost the town of Paradise in 2018. Now, in this fire, we lost two towns: the town of Grizzly Flats and the town of Greenville. These are towns that you lost the store, you lost the hospital, you lost the fire station——

The President. Everything.

Director Ghilarducci. ——the school. The whole nine yards.

And this is why the whole issue of predisaster mitigation and the efforts that the Governor has raised here and has us working on—I know that you're interested in supporting through grants and others kinds of things, but also that the disaster assistance be—the disaster assistance you provided for the Dixie Fire and the River Fire, Mr. President, was fantastic. And now the Caldor Fire. And to work through the individual assistance to help those people who are uninsured or underinsured.

The people who live in these small, rural communities are typically seniors. They're underserved as a whole. And so we can't let them, sort of, hang out there.

So we appreciate all the work that you've done with that. And we're going to continue to work on all the hazard mitigation efforts and do the fuel treatment and really harden our communities as much as we possibly can.

The President. Well, Gov, there's a lot that we can do, and it starts off being a Federal responsibility, in my view. And—but there's an awful lot that has to be done, and it can be done.

And you're going to hear people say, "Biden is proposing all these big projects, and the Build Back Better is going to cost all that money." You know, let's assume they do pass my \$3.5 trillion proposal to build back better, which is \$300 billion for fire mitigation, a whole range of things. Okay? That's over 10 years—over 10 years. And it's expected that the economy will grow—the GDP, the economy, over the next 10 years, will be \$299 trillion. It's going to be less than one-fifth—well, excuse me—five-tenths of 1 percent of the entire GDP. And we pay for it.

So, all this malarkey—you know, we know we have no problem coming up with \$2 trillion in tax cuts for people who don't need it. But—I'm serious.

So we don't—we can't afford not to do it, but we can afford to do it.

And the last thing I want to leave you with: These are jobs. Good jobs. When you think climate change, think of jobs. These are good-paying jobs that aren't going to be \$7 an hour or \$9 an hour, or \$10, or even \$15. They're going to be jobs that are going to provide prevailing wage, because so much has to be built in terms of bridges and homes. I mean, there's a lot we can do.

So, please, don't lose faith. Don't lose faith. Again, keep it up. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:30 p.m. at the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES). In his remarks, he referred to Sens. Alejandro Padilla and Dianne Feinstein; Gov. John Bel Edwards of Louisiana; Gov. Brad Little of Idaho; and Gov. Gregory W. Abbott of

Texas. He also referred to H.R. 3684. Chief Porter referred to Bryan May, chief of public information and media relations, Cal OES.

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