

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2025

Remarks Prior to a Briefing on the Federal Response to the Wildfires in the Los Angeles, California, Area and an Exchange With Reporters

January 10, 2025

[Governor Gavin C. Newsom of California, Mayor Karen R. Bass of Los Angeles, CA, and Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Deanne Bennett Criswell participated in the briefing via videoconference.]

The President. Here's what we're going to do. We're going to get a briefing from the Governor and the mayor and FEMA, and then we're going to lay out where we go from here. Okay?

Ready? Get set. Go.

White House aide. Ready.

The President. All right. Vice President Harris and I are about to receive a briefing from Governor Newsom and Mayor Bass and the FEMA Director, Criswell. So both of them are on the ground leading the fight against this godawful wildfires in California—the worst in California history.

And there has been some progress in the last 24 hours, so I want to give an update of where we think things are at the moment.

First, overnight, local, State, and Federal firefighters were able to partially prevent some of the largest fires from spreading to new areas: 3 percent in Pasadena has been kept from spreading, 8 percent in the Pacific Palisades, 35 percent in Ventura, and 37 percent in Sylmar. And I—but this time yesterday, these fires were mostly spreading out of control.

Look, we've still got a long way to go, as we're about to hear from the Governor and others. And while the winds have died down for the time, we expect they'll remain a threat until early next week. So we're going to keep working 24/7 to support State and local officials to fully stop these fires as soon as possible.

Next, we're going to make sure California has every possible resource to fight these fires and help survivors. As soon as the fire started, I approved the Fire Management Assistance Grants, which is a fancy phrase for saying the grants to cover the cost of firefighting federally and the gear, equipment, and capabilities like search and rescue.

Then, I immediately approved the Governor's request of major disaster declaration, which will pay for things like debris removal, temporary lodging, and first responder overtime pay. Both of these—the grants and the declaration—usually cover 75 percent of the State's costs. But yesterday I directed the Federal Government to cover 100 percent of State costs for 180 days.

I also announced FEMA has—is going—has turned on its Critical Needs Assistance program. This program gives a one-time payment of \$750 to survivors so they can quickly purchase critical items, like water, formula, gasoline, and prescription drugs. And survivors should go to disasterassistance.gov or call 1-800-621-3362. We can't help you if we don't know you need the help, so call disasterassistance.gov—I mean, contact or call 1-800-621-3362.

And I want to be clear: This is not the only aid that survivors can request from FEMA. More programs are going to be available through the—that disaster declaration, but this is assistance that survivors can get now and get it fast.

We're also helping the State and local law enforcement personnel keep people safe. I've offered Governor Newsom additional support on that front too. For example, the Defense Department—military personnel can help direct traffic, evacuate people where traffic lights have been destroyed.

Finally, I want to thank all the first responders. And I often say, "God made man, then he made a few firefighters." And these are men and women. The firefighters of Los Angeles are proof of that.

The scope, the scale, and the erratic movements of these fires is truly unprecedented. I mean, it's truly unprecedented. And—but day after day, these firefighters have been pulling 24-hour shifts, rushing the flames with hurricane-force winds as well, to rescue people, to evacuate neighborhoods, and put these fires out.

Now, I speak for the American people when I say we owe you, we're with you, and we're going to make sure you get every resource you need.

And I want to turn it over to the Vice President.

Vice President Kamala D. Harris. Thank you, Mr. President. As you've said, what we have been witnessing is truly mass devastation. And whether we are talking about Sylmar to the Palisades to Altadena, it's important to know that we're talking about neighborhoods of people who, in many cases—I think about Altadena—these are—these homes have been in these families for generations. And in many of these homes, it is a multigenerational family that lives there.

Also understand that, in a lot of these neighborhoods, the folks who live there also work in that neighborhood, which means they've lost their home and their livelihood. So the devastation that we are looking at is multigenerational and is going to linger for quite some time.

And the work, under the President's leadership, that we are doing through the Federal Government to provide aid in every way to the Governor, to the mayor, to local police and fire is critically important, and we are doing it with a sense of urgency.

I also would mention that not only are firefighters out there working around the clock, some of whom—sadly, more than a few—who have lost their own homes in the fire, but so too with LAPD police officers who are working around the clock, and there are at least a dozen who have also lost their own homes to the fire.

So there is a real human story that is associated with the mass devastation that we are seeing, and everything that we can do to support, we will do. Also understanding there are moments where we should find optimism in the heroism of people who are taking in strangers, taking in friends, providing shelter to evacuees—people looking out for each other. Regardless of where they come from or who they voted for, they're looking out for each other and showing the best of the American spirit in a moment of crisis.

The President. In addition to that, I want to point out that this is not going to be over even when all the fires are out.

Vice President Harris. Yes.

The President. It's just going to be the beginning. And the change in insurance policy in California for these modest homes——

Vice President Harris. Yes.

The President. ——as well as these really expensive homes and businesses. So the—we're going to be around a long while, Gov, to help, the Federal Government.

Gov. Newsom. Yes.

The President. And the mayor as well.

So—but why don't I yield to you, Governor, for any comments you have to make. Bring us up to date.

Gov. Newsom. I appreciate it, Mr. President and Madam Vice President. Let me just pick up, in the spirit of your comments. But first, with just deep gratitude to both of you for being so solicitous, so supportive, hand in glove in this operation. There's simply not an ask that hasn't been met.

The major disaster declaration, Mr. President, was a game changer. In fact, you were able to do that within 36 hours. I don't know that there's another precedent in American history for disaster that was in the making, was unfolding and for you to be there in real time and prescient as well. It turns out that we're going to need all of that support. And the fact that you were able to provide a hundred percent is just tremendous relief on the FMAG side and other disaster relief side.

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

But it is important, and I cannot impress upon you more how happy I was to hear, Mr. President, you say [disasterassistance.gov](https://www.disasterassistance.gov). People are now naturally calling. There's tremendous anxiety out there around getting immediate assistance. The reality of this is starting to come.

The President. Yes.

Gov. Newsom. The clarity is—as the, you know, smoke begins to move and, in daylight, people are starting to understand the magnitude. I had thought I never would see anything like the Tubbs Fire and then the Camp Fire. This is up there. This will be one of the most destructive fires, I mean, in terms of property damage, perhaps in the history of the country, but certainly in terms of scale and scope—10-plus thousand structures already identified. Ten people we fear have lost their lives; likelihood of more. The magnitude of this is pretty profound.

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

And final words: You know, I ask you, we've got to deal with this misinformation. There were hurricane-force winds——

The President. That's right.

Gov. Newsom. ——of mis- and disinformation, lies. People want to divide this country, and we're going to have to address that as well.

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

And I cannot impress upon you personally, on behalf of 40 million Americans that live in the great State of California, how proud we are of you, the Vice President, and your leadership.

The President. Well, Gov, thank you. You know, that's why I think it's so important I—we speak plainly to the American people and let them know what we can and can't do.

For example, those churches that get burned down you talked about, those public schools, the Federal Government will pay to rebuild those—rebuild those. There's a—so we have to let people know that there are things that are going to be coming that we've declared—and there's disaster relief legislation and others—that are going to be available.

Because I think people say: "Okay. I'm out. But, God, what happens now? What do I"—and—but we're not leaving. We're not leaving until we get it done.

Karen—Mayor.

Mayor Bass. Yes. Thank you, Mr. President and Madam Vice President.

I just can't emphasize enough how important your support and involvement has been. And how, in the midst of such incredible devastation and tragedy, that it has been comforting to know that you are—have been accessible.

[Mayor Bass continued her remarks, concluding as follows.]

And so, again, let me just end by saying that, you know, your leadership—your leadership, period—over the last several years has just been outstanding, Mr. President, Madam Vice President. Madam Vice President, who's an Angeleno, we know that you know.

When I spoke with you yesterday, you mentioned that you had to evacuate. You weren't going to mention yourself, but I asked you, and you mentioned that you had to evacuate from your home here while you were in Washington, DC. And I just want to commend your outstanding leadership and let you know how the residents of Los Angeles are so deeply grateful.

Vice President Harris. Thank you.

The President. Karen, one of the things I've found in my experience in dealing with these disasters—similar, not as devastating than this—is: People take a look at the immediate help, and they're satisfied, they're happy. But they look down the road and say: "My God, look at downtown. It's gone. Look at—how are we going to do this?"

We're going to need the United States Congress to follow up with appropriations to help provide for significant help for our fellow Americans who need this help to pay for the—these programs that we have because a lot more is going to be happening.

And now, yield to a woman who's an expert in all this. She and I have traveled more States that are—flying over fires for the last 4 years, and we've literally observed, from the air or on the ground, more areas burned to the ground—burned to the ground—from Arizona all the way up to Idaho—than the entire State of Maryland, if you took it all—to the ground.

And so we've—but we're used to this, but nothing like the concentration that's here. This is profound.

And so we've got the best person we could.

Go ahead, Deanne.

Administrator Criswell. Thank you. Yes, thank you, Mr. President, Madam Vice President. I mean, you and I, sir, have traveled many different disasters, and I can say from what I've seen here yesterday that this is certainly one of the most destructive that you and I have had to deal with during our time here.

[Administrator Criswell continued her remarks, concluding as follows.]

And I think, Mr. President and Madam Vice President, what I would just close with is that, as you have said and as, you know, the Governor—and I've talked to the Governor and the mayor—we are going to be here with you. Governor, Mayor, just know that FEMA, the entire Federal family, is going to be here with you throughout this entire recovery journey. We are going to work through the complicated problems together. We're going to find the right Federal resource to meet the needs and to get the outcomes that you want. And we're going to help every Angeleno with the impacts that they've had and help them on this road to recovery.

The President. Thank you. You know—

Mayor Bass. Thank you.

The President. —one of the things that—

Administrator Criswell. Thank you.

The President. —that you and I have done, Deanne, is we not only have to build back, we have to build back better. There are certain things we can do to prevent things from being—if the same thing occurred—from as much damage occurring. And that costs money, but it also saves money.

There is climate—

Administrator Criswell. Yes.

The President. —change. There is climate change. This is part of it. And we have to deal with it.

And the other thing is that, you know, when I was with you, Gov, and we were looking around the State, it looked to me, as I traveled—when I was out with you in California, it—what it reminded me of—it reminded me of—more of a war scene where you had certain targets that were bombarded, where artillery was—just blew them up with no—with no rhyme or reason. In other words, you'd have this fire going crazy and burning everything down and three houses being fine—

Gov. Newsom. Yes.

The President. —nothing is happening.

Or neighborhoods that were still green—I mean, still green, and next to a place that—for example, you know, there was—we were just looking at a Secret Service house that was out there. You know, all the vehicles were melted—melt—melt—yet that house next door still has green shrubbery on it, and, you know, it—the house is fine. There's only, I think, 4 or 5 houses in that 200—you know, it's in the Pasadena area.

But my generic point is, it's almost like it's a—it's a battle scene.

Vice President Harris. But you know, Mr. President—

Gov. Newsom. Yes.

Vice President Harris. —we saw that in South Carolina, North Carolina—

The President. Yes, I know. That's the point.

Vice President Harris. —Georgia, and Florida with hurricanes.

The President. Yes, same thing.

Vice President Harris. This is also the nature of, to your point, this changing climate, these extreme weather conditions, not only are they volatile and devastating, but there is no method necessarily to how—to the impact in terms of the predictability of where it might land, if we're talking about a hurricane, or a wildfire.

The President. Well, for example, we—

Vice President Harris. And so resilience and adaptation becomes more important.

The President. You know, we found, Gov, that in these other areas, like the hurricanes from North Carolina to Florida, where you saw entire highways devastated—

Vice President Harris. Yes.

The President. —coming off the side of the mountains, dropping into—

Vice President Harris. Yes.

The President. Well, we've got to build back the highway a different way——

Vice President Harris. That's right.

The President. ——to make it stronger.

Vice President Harris. That's right.

The President. We're—so we're going to have to deal with this, and we can make it—I know if anybody—any of your constituents are listening and saying, "My, God, don't tell me about 'better,' just tell me when about getting back." But you know, we can not only build it back, we can build it back better, God willing.

Gov. Newsom. A hundred percent. No, it's a—it is remarkable, and it's—yes, to your point, particularly as the smoke is clearing, you see that, you know, very indelibly and visually here in this fire. These newly constructed homes more likely to have survived—those with different materials, those with the latest home hardening investments.

And that would—the chapter, verse, the lesson, the master class in this was the Camp Fire. Remember, we lost 85 lives——

The President. Yes.

Gov. Newsom. ——18,000 structures up there in Paradise, California, and those structures that did survive—and so we've changed our building codes. We began to adapt to this new reality. And I just say this to the deniers out there: You may not believe in science, but you have to believe your own eyes.

[*Gov. Newsom continued his remarks, concluding as follows.*]

And on that, Mr. President, this is an area that we need to focus right now, and that's the likelihood that we may see some intense rain and a lot——

The President. Exactly.

Gov. Newsom. ——of debris flow——

The President. Exactly.

Gov. Newsom. ——and issues around massive flooding, which often is more deadly than the fires themselves.

The President. That's what——

Mayor Bass. And we——

The President. ——happened in North Carolina. When we talked about the hurricane, you saw the entire rivers fill and—anyway, there's a lot we can do though.

Mayor Bass. You know, I do remember when we used to have a fire season. Do you remember that, Governor? You——

Gov. Newsom. No. [*Laughter*]

Mayor Bass. ——used to have a fire season, right? In your—in your entire term, that has not been the case. This is January. [*Laughter*] Fire season used to be at the end of summer. So, you know, absolutely correct.

And then we know that that was the reason for such massive, massive devastation.

But, again, you know, sending out your Deanne Criswell—Criswell. It was wonderful to meet you yesterday. Everybody was very excited to know that you were going to be here and to know that FEMA was going to be a resource that they can access right away. Continuing that is really what is needed right now. And I want to thank you once again.

The President. The Vice President and I have initiated every Federal agency, from the Department of Defense on—every Federal agency—to be part of this.

And the other thing is, look, you know, I think you're getting a bad rap. I know you're getting a bad rap about "these fire hydrants don't have enough water in them." Give me a break. Give me a break.

What this is all about is, the utilities, understandably—what they did is they cut off power because they're worried about these high-tension lines coming down and causing more fires in the wind. Right? When they do that, guess what? They shut off the power that controls the ability to pump the water. And so now they're putting—they're getting generators now. I mean, this is complicated stuff.

You're going to have a lot of demagogues out there trying to take advantage of it, but you're doing the right thing. We're going to get it done, God willing.

And I say to the people of Southern California: "God bless you. Stay strong. Stay strong. We're not going anywhere. We're not going anywhere."

Mayor Bass. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Gov. Newsom. Thank you, Mr. President, for everything.

The President. And you know, all kidding aside, you both have my phone number, so——

Mayor Bass. Yes, we do. [*Laughter*]

The President. No—no, I'm for real. Anything that comes up, if you have any ideas.

And—and if you didn't, I've got a California Vice President, man.

Gov. Newsom. Yes, that's—that helps too.

The President. She's mildly focused on this, God love her.

Mayor Bass. The access to both of you is a tremendous benefit.

Gov. Newsom. Yes.

The President. All right. Well, thank you very much. Keep in touch, okay?

Mayor Bass. Okay.

Gov. Newsom. Thank you for everything.

The President. Thank you.

Mayor Bass. Bye-bye.

Vice President Harris. Take care, guys.

White House aide. Thanks, press. Thanks, press. Let's go. Thanks guys. Thank you, press.

[*Several reporters began speaking at once.*]

White House aide. All right. Thanks, folks.

[*Several reporters spoke at once.*]

The President. Whoa. Hey, I'm going to be talking a little later this afternoon about a number of things you're asking about, from Russian energy to what's going on in terms of the economy, but I've been focused on this issue now. And let's focus on this, and we'll be back on the rest of it.

So, about this, you can ask me questions.

Federal Wildfire Response/Presidential Transition

Q. Can I just ask you about—you mentioned yesterday that you're about to leave office. Are you coordinating with the incoming administration about this Federal response?

The President. We are making—everything they know—every single thing we're doing about the response—what—the response, my hope is that they will have—at least acknowledge we have some significant experience in this. We've done really well on it, and I'm praying that they continue to focus.

Loss of Life in Los Angeles Area Wildfires

Q. Mr. President, have you been told that the loss of life is likely to increase significantly in California?

The President. It is likely it will increase. Whether it's significantly or not, we don't know yet. There's still a lot of people who are unaccounted for. We don't know where they are. I think this toll is likely to go up. Whether it's significant or not—pray God it's not—but it could be.

Q. How concerned are you about looting, Mr. President, in this?

The President. [Inaudible]

Looting in Wildfire-Impacted Areas

Q. How concerned are you about looting and incidents of looting in Los Angeles—

The President. We are concerned. That's why I provided more police officers and more military. Now, look, the DOD is in full bore with this. They're providing everything from security through the military, the National Guard; supplementing the National Guard. Because we are—there's clear evidence that there's looting. There's clear evidence that people are going into these survivor—even places where they're not—they're evacuated, and it's not all rubble, and people are going in, and they're looting.

And so that's going to—that—we know that will continue, unless we make sure we—we're providing the help to prevent it from happening.

Federal Funding for Wildfire Recovery Efforts/Climate Change

Q. Mr. President, what will you be seeking from Congress? Is the supplemental for this, specifically, or is it broader for FEMA?

The President. Well, I think—I think whether I'm going to be here to suggest it, and I have 10 days left—we have 10 days left, but we're briefing the opposition—"the opposition"—the incoming administration on what they're going to have to do.

Look, we have an awful lot of experience in this, unfortunately. Climate change has been real. It's been real for the last 4 years of our administration. We've seen devastating impacts of consequences of the changes.

And it's just like—you know, there are—it's going to take more funding. I mean, look, you're the most informed people in the country. I'm not being facetious. You cover this every single minute. You've seen what these downtowns look like. I mean, they look like a bomb hit them.

They look like they actually have been blown up—entire sections of the cities blown up. Just to remove the debris—just to remove the debris—is an incredibly expensive undertaking.

We're going to do it for them. We're going to get it done. We're going to pay for it, but we've got to be prepared to pay for it. And when we do, we've got to build back better than we did before.

So thank you.

White House aide. Thank you, press.

[Several reporters spoke at once.]

Wildfire Recovery Cost Estimates

The President. One last—one last question. There was one last question: Do I have any estimates of cost?

I could tell you, based on my experience, what I think the cost would be, but I'm not going to do that because we don't know. We want to make sure when we—we get the cost estimate, it's real. We've thought it through. We get—we got the engineers and the scientists in to give us the best assessment of what's happening.

And one of the things that is going to have to change, and it's been—I've been a—been broken record on this for the last 3 years: We've got to change the way in which we transmit energy. And these high-tension wires that are the things that cause—some—remember we had someone from the other team talking about, "Well, we just ought to sweep the floor of the—the forest floor so we have no fires." Come on, man.

You know, we—the idea is, if we had these wires underground, it's a hell of a lot safer. We wouldn't have as many fires as we have now or in the future, but it costs a hell of a lot of money to put it underground.

So we're working out all those issues to determine what would be needed—when I say "build back better"—to build back in a way that diminishes the prospect that the change in weather and the environment is going to continue to cause such devastation.

We can protect against much of it, but it's going to cost a lot of money to do it.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:15 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House.

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