

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2025

Remarks During a Briefing on the Federal Response to the Wildfires in the Los Angeles, California, Area

January 13, 2025

[United States Forest Service Chief Randy Moore and Federal Emergency Management Agency Region 9 Administrator Robert J. Fenton, Jr., participated in the briefing via videoconference.]

The President. Folks, what we're going to do is I'm going to make a brief statement; the Vice President is going to make a brief statement; Liz is going to call on Chief Moore and call on Griswell [Criswell; White House correction], the—so FEMA is spoken; and then I—we're going to each ask some questions; and then we're going to ask you to leave. Okay? Unless you want to talk about the Moon or something.

You can smile. It's okay. She's a real tough guy, right there.

All right? Okay.

Can you guys hear us?

Chief Moore. Yes, we can hear you.

The President. All right.

Well, look, we're heading into the second week of fire—of wildfires out in California. These wildfires are the worst in California history.

And Vice President Harris and I are about to meet with Secretary Mayorkas, who is here; FEMA Administrator; FEMA Regional Administrator—Regional Administrator; and the Chief of U.S. Fire—Forest Service.

And, first, I want to share an update on where things stand now as we know it.

One, over the past few weeks, State and local and Federal firefighters were able to prevent the largest fires from moving into new areas. In other words, they've been able to contain the fires. Fourteen-percent containment in the Pacific Palisades has been—that's how much has been contained. Thirty-three percent in the fire in Pasadena. Ninety-five percent in Sylmar. And the fire in Ventura has been 100-percent contained. And that's progress.

That said, that was a heartbreaking weekend for a lot of people in Los Angeles. Ash was raining down like snow. Homes burned to the ground; thousands of those homes are gone. And we learned we lost more of our fellow Americans.

So let's say again to the people Los Angeles: We're with you. We're with you.

And you know, although the Federal Government is going to cover 100 percent of the cost for the next 180 days for things like firefighter overtime pay, debris removal, temporary shelters, it's going to cost tens of billions of dollars to get Los Angeles back to where it was.

So we're going to need Congress to step up to provide funding to get this done. And we're going to get that done, God willing.

Over the next few days, we're expecting strong wind gusts that are—could move—be—you know, more fires—more fuel for fires. And I'm continuing to direct the Federal Government to do everything possible with—everything we possibly can to help California.

I've sent equipment to Los Angeles, including helicopters, tanker planes, and fire engines. And our allies in Canada and Mexico have sent 130 firefighters and emergency responders, as the team knows.

I've asked Bob Fenton of FEMA to help—who helped Hawaii after the Maui fires—to take the lead in coordinating the Federal support and debris recovery and removal in Los Angeles.

And the first step of that is coordinating between FEMA, EPA, and the Army Corps of Engineers to remove the hazardous debris before you can get in and remove it all. And that hazardous debris includes things like propane tanks, electric vehicles, and battery—[inaudible].

Then, the monumental task of removing the rest of that debris can begin, but it's a monumental task.

And I've activated 500 marines from the base in Pendleton to stand by and help in search and rescue, airlift support, and food and water distribution.

And I want to be clear: We're not waiting until those fires are over to be—to start helping the victims. We're getting them help right now, as you all know.

People impacted by these fires are going to receive a one-time payment of \$770—a one-time payment—so they can quickly purchase things like water, baby formula, and prescriptions. So far, nearly 6,000 survivors have registered to do just that and \$5.1 million has gone out.

And I encourage everyone—everyone—who has been impacted to get assistance. Go to disasterassistance.gov or call 1-800-621-3362. Let me repeat that number: 1-800-621-3362.

Before I turn this over to Vice President Harris, let me say again to all the incredible firefighters and first responders: Thank you, thank you, thank you. Los Angeles is the City of Angels, and you're now the angels—all of you. You're the angels, literally, saving people's lives, and we owe you.

And we owe your families, who are also in harm's way, and you're still going out and doing your job.

To the people of Los Angeles: Thank you for sticking together, for helping one another through an unimaginable loss. And I want you to know—and I mean this—I want you to know we have no higher priority than the safety of you folks in Los Angeles. We're going to keep doing everything possible to help you get through this.

And, Vice President Harris, I now turn it over to you.

Vice President Kamala D. Harris. Thank you, Mr. President.

So what is happening in Los Angeles is truly heartbreaking, and there's an extraordinary amount of trauma that so many people are experiencing through loss of life, loss of their homes, loss of normalcy.

[*At this point, Vice President Harris continued her remarks, concluding as follows.*]

And so let us just always, again, thank our firefighters, our police officers, our first responders for what they are doing to personally sacrifice so much for the sake of others.

Thank you.

Homeland Security Adviser Elizabeth D. Sherwood-Randall. Thank you, Madam Vice President.

We'll now go to the U.S. Forest Service Chief, Randy Moore, who's out in Los Angeles.

Chief Moore, over to you.

Chief Moore. Thank you.

Mr. President, Madam Vice President, the situation remains very dynamic, with immediate threats to life and safety. One important thing to name is that, unlike what we normally will think of with wildland fires, where they're often on the landscape for weeks, these incidents are—come from urban conflagrations—whereas once the winds are over and if containment continues to increase, we would expect these incidents to move rapidly from fire suppression to recovery.

[Chief Moore continued his remarks, concluding as follows.]

The Forest Service is also coordinating with our fellow USDA agencies, including Rural Development, Farm Service Agency, and Natural Resources Conservation Service to provide an integrated effort for long-term recovery needs. And our Research Department is also working with the city of Los Angeles and other water providers to provide some ash contamination modeling for water users.

So we're likely to have boots on the ground of these teams by Thursday morning, after the "red flag" incidents subside.

End of report.

The President. Randy, is there any more support the Federal Government can be providing to support to the firefighters doing this heroic work? Anything else we could be doing?

Chief Moore. I think—when you look at the amount of aircraft, I think we provided everything that's been asked for and that's needed.

In terms of firefighters, we have what we call "U2Fs"—U—"UTFs"—that's "unable to fill." We don't have any unable-to-fill positions that have been requested to date.

The President. Thank you.

Madam Vice President.

Vice President Harris. Randy, if, God forbid, the fires go beyond Los Angeles County, given the surge of resources into Los Angeles, what is your level of confidence that we'll be able to get the resources to any neighboring county in time?

Chief Moore. I'm confident that we'll be able to get the resources. We have access right now to about 15,000 firefighters that are not currently being used, that's not needed. So, if things got out of hand, and let's just say that the wind conditions blew the fires back out into the wildland, we do have firefighters prepositioned in a lot of different areas to look at that initial attack.

And I mentioned the 235 fires now that these same groups of people have been able to bat down to about 5 or 6 major fires.

Vice President Harris. Good.

The President. Can I ask one more question, Randy? Are you hearing any misinformation that's going out, false assertions that are being made about the state of the effort to fight the fire?

Chief Moore. Well, I mean, there's always rumors with large fires like this, Mr. President. And one of the—one of the things that everybody wants to know is how did these fires start. And until the team of investigators conclude their investigations, we don't really know.

And so there's a lot of speculation out there about how these fires start, but there's no proof to validate a lot of these rumors that we're hearing.

The President. Thank you.

Homeland Security Adviser Sherwood-Randall. Thank you, Randy.

And now to Administrator Criswell from FEMA.

Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Deanne Bennett Criswell. All right. Thank you, Liz.

Mr. President, Madam Vice President, you know, at your direction, I was on the ground there on Thursday and Friday. I had an opportunity to meet with incident commanders at both the Palisades Fire as well as the Eaton Fire.

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

And some of them are already getting notices and letters, you know, that the information has been received, but it's not final yet. There's a lot of confusion about that right now, and we recognize that.

The President. Explain that a little more.

Administrator Criswell. So, when somebody registers for assistance and they have not submitted all of their documentation, like what their insurance company is going to cover or not cover, they'll get a letter from us saying, "You're not approved yet." They'll—

The President. Can they get a letter if their—if they have no home, how do they get a letter?

Administrator Criswell. It's through e-mail. So they get an e-mail notification—

The President. I just want to make sure we—*[inaudible]*.

Administrator Criswell. Yes. They get an e-mail notification to check their case and that it's been updated. But we want them to know that it just means we need the rest of that documentation.

So I've directed my team to start calling every one of these families that have already gotten this type of a notification so we can make sure that they know that, "Hey, we just need more documentation. We want to work with you and help you through this." Because it's traumatizing, right? And then to have this bureaucracy, you know, limit that, we—I'm trying to take away the bureaucracy, at your direction. That's "how much can I get rid of?" This is one of the things we're going to do is add that personal touch and call all of these families that have already received this notice so we can get them the assistance that they're eligible for and help them upload the documentation that they might need.

The President. You hear it reported by the press that there's misinformation being put out there by—from some sources or even people identifying themselves and going on the air saying such and such.

Administrator Criswell. Yes.

The President. Are you seeing much of that, and does it have an impact on the public?

Administrator Criswell. We are seeing some of that, similar to what we saw in North Carolina after Hurricanes Helene, Hurricane Milton.

We even saw somebody put out a way to spread a message through phones that said FEMA is going to provide 3 years of coverage for hotel rooms, which was completely false and not sent by us.

And so our external affairs team works hard to put out the right information. And we work with the community to try to get the trusted voices within the community to help get the right message out—

The President. Yes.

Administrator Criswell. —and know who they need to go to in order to get this process started.

Unfortunately, there's a lot of people that try to take advantage of these families that have lost everything, try to apply for assistance on their behalf, try to get them to apply on a false website. Those are the things that we see in almost every disaster. It just continues to get worse and worse, it seems like, disaster after disaster.

The President. I think that's right.

Vice President Harris. Given that the winds may pick up tonight and the evacuation geography may change, how are individuals and families going to be alerted if they are now required to evacuate, especially if it happens during the night?

Administrator Criswell. Yes, that's something that the State and the county have a system to do a wireless emergency alert. It will go right to their cell phone if there's an evacuation order for their area. And even if somebody drives into the area, it will let them know that they are in an evacuation zone.

When I was there, my phone would go off when I would drive into the different areas—when I would drive into Pasadena—saying: "This is an evacuation zone. You need to leave."

And so that alert system goes out, and they have their own provider that sends those out. It's all directed at the county level.

Vice President Harris. And then, do you know whether the requests that have been made of the Federal Government, local, State—are they all being met or are there any that have yet to be met?

Administrator Criswell. So all of the firefighting requests that are going through Randy and all his folks are all being met. We are starting this planning process for the recovery, and we're prepositioning some resources, like food and water, closer to the area if they need it.

California's resource—they've got a lot of resources, and so they have plenty that they're drawing from their own stockpiles right now and don't need ours, but we want to make sure, if they do, we have ours ready to go.

And so anything that the State has asked for outside of the fires that FEMA would provide, we've been able to meet all of those requests.

Vice President Harris. Liz, do you have—

The President. Thank you.

Vice President Harris. —anything to add to that?

Homeland Security Adviser Sherwood-Randall. Thank you very much. I'm all good.

So, with that—

White House aide. Thanks, guys. Thank you, press.

Q. Mr. President, do you—

Q. What is your view, sir—

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:15 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 14.

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