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Remarks on Departure for a Tour of Southern California Areas Damaged by Wildfires

October 25, 2007

Good morning. I'm on my way out to California. I'm looking forward to seeing Governor Schwarzenegger, to thank him for all the good work that the State and local authorities are doing to help the good people of southern California battle these wildfires. I will assure the people of California that the Federal Government will be deploying resources, assets, and manpower necessary to help fight these fires. As well, I will assure them that there's a—because of the declaration I signed yesterday, there will be help for the people of California. Evidently, the winds are more favorable today, which should be encouraging to the firefighters.

I'm also looking forward to spending some time with some of the firefighters. We've got some incredibly brave citizens who are risking their lives to protect people and property in California, and we owe a great debt of gratitude to our Nation's firefighters.

It's a sad situation out there in southern California. I fully understand that the people have got a lot of anguish in their hearts, and they just need to know a lot of folks care about them. And I'm looking forward to my trip out there.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:31 a.m. on the South Lawn at the White House.

Remarks Following a Tour of Areas Damaged by Wildfires and an Exchange With Reporters in San Diego, California

October 25, 2007

The President. The Senator and the Congressman and the Governor and I have come up here to survey firsthand the terrible devastations done by the fires here in the San Diego area. We've met the Jeffcoats, who came up this hill and went to what was their home. And we know how tough it is for you; 39 years of marriage—that's something that you didn't think you'd be dealing with after all this time. So we want to let you know that the American people care for people like you who are suffering. We appreciate your spirit; we really do. I think all of us who met you were very impressed by your determination to deal with this tough moment in your life and rebuild your lives.

To the extent that people need help from the Federal Government, we will help. I am here, really, to make sure that the Federal effort works hand-in-glove with what the Governor has been doing. The Governor has taken the lead down here, and he's done a fine job. The thing I like about Governor Schwarzenegger, he says, "You show me a problem, I'll charge it; if you show me a hill, I'll go up it"—and that's exactly what he's done.

And my job is to make sure that FEMA and the Defense Department and the Interior Department and Ag Department respond in a way that helps people get the job done. And that's what I'm here to listen to.

I want to thank the Senator for joining me. On the flight down, we had a good conversation. She's deeply concerned about the citizens of California. She asked the right kind of questions, and, you know, we're going to give her the answers.

And Congressman, thank you for joining us. This is his district. It's got to be tough for you to represent the good people here and know that people are suffering.

But anyway, thanks for being here, and God bless you all.

Kendra Jeffcoat. Thank you, President——

The President. God bless the people of this State. Thank you.

Mrs. Jeffcoat. Thank you very much.

Jay Jeffcoat. Thank you.

Federal Response to Southern California Wildfires and Hurricane Katrina

Q. Mr. President, a lot has been made about the contrast between this response and the Katrina response. Do you have any thoughts on that and how you're doing?

The President. You better ask the Governor how we're doing. I will tell you this: On all these responses, the thing that has amazed me most is the courage of our first-responders. The firefighters here in this part

of the world are incredibly brave people. The police force has done a fabulous job.

And same in the Katrina area. I mean, I know there was a lot of criticism of effort, but remember, there was 33,000 people pulled off roofs by brave Coast Guard men and women flying those choppers. A lot of people's lives were saved.

Representative Brian Bilbray. San Diego County has a centralized disaster response team made up of the county chairman as the chairman of the Disaster Council and every police chief and fire chief and mayor, so there's a network here that those of us in the Federal and the State level are able to come supplement. But the backbone of this response was the local providers, because they were organized. So the real heroes here are the providers, are the men and women working for the counties and the cities and the fire districts that really were here first and foremost, and we're just supplementing.

The President. Yes, see, that's an interesting question. I appreciate you asking it. My hearts are with the Jeffcoats right now, that's what I'm thinking. I'm thinking about people whose lives turned upside down. The experts can try to figure out whether the response was perfect or not. All I can tell you is, when the Governor calls, I answer his phone. When the Governor says, "We need this help; think about sending these troops here," I got on the phone; I called the appropriate people. I'm interested in helping him solve problems and helping the folks here at the county level. There's all kinds of time for historians to compare this response or that response, but those of us who are here from Government, our hearts are right here with the Jeffcoats; that's where we are.

And I'm looking forward—and I know the Senator and Governor and Congressman is—to eating lunch with the firefighters. We can't thank people enough for putting their lives at risk to help a neighbor, and that's exactly what's taking place. If there needs to be more firefighters, we'll send more firefighters. Those are the kind of questions that we're asking; what does it take to get the job done?

Fire-suppression Equipped Airplanes

Q. Mr. President, Congressman Hunter tried to get some of the C–130s here, and they are here, but they are still on the ground, and the National Guard won't let them fly. What seems to be the problem? We really need those because the flames continue to fan.

The President. I'll find out. I'll find out.

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. I just want to add to this because I want to thank the President for coming out here today. I can tell you that when we saw on Monday the flames going out of control and it becoming really a major disaster, I told my assistant that we got to call the President and ask for help. And before I ever had a chance to make that phone call—I remember I was in the middle of a briefing—the President—I was in—I got the phone, they said, it's the President on the phone. And he called me, and he told me that he's really concerned about the fires here in California, and if anything he can do, anything that we need, we should let him know; that all his entire Cabinet and his whole staff, his team, everyone is available.

So I call this quick action, I mean, quicker than I expected, I can tell you that. And since then, we've been talking every day on the phone. And we asked him for an emergency declaration; they got it within 24 hours. We asked for a disaster declaration; we got that within 24 hours. And then he called me back and says, "I'm going to come out because I'm really concerned about the people in California and what they are going through. We want to make sure that we help them get back on their feet." And here he is.

So I call this very unbelievable response from the Federal Government and the Bush administration, from everyone. And from Senator Feinstein—I want to thank you also for the great response, and she was calling us every hour and being concerned. So I would say this is really great response, and you cannot do this without everyone working together. And what we have seen here, unlike other disasters, I mean, how quickly the locals, the State, and the Federal Government came together, and everyone working together was really extraordinary to watch. So I want to thank everyone. I want to thank you again, President, for coming out here today and helping us.

The President. Okay, thank you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:28 a.m. in the Rancho Bernardo neighborhood. In his remarks, he referred to Senator Dianne Feinstein.

Remarks in Escondido, California

October 25, 2007

Governor, thank you very much. First thing I want to let the people know out here in southern California is that many across our Nation have been moved by the plight of the citizens who have lost their homes, lost their possessions, and particularly those who have lost their life. It's very important for those who are wondering about their future to know, there's a lot of good citizens all across America who are praying for your future and who really want to stand with you.

I appreciate the leadership of Governor Schwarzenegger. I said earlier, when we were at the neighborhood, there's no hill he's not willing to charge, no problem he's not willing to solve. And we've got a big problem out here, and I appreciate his leadership. It makes a significant difference when you have somebody in the statehouse willing to take the lead. I've come to make sure that the Federal Government provides the help for people here at the local level.

I do want to thank Senator Feinstein for joining us. I want to thank the local mayors, statehouse folks, the Congresspeople for being with us as well.

Really, it's important for me to come out here and see firsthand the situation. And there's no question, a lot of people are suffering. And there's no question, there's been terrible losses.

I also am out here to make sure these firefighters behind me and the first-responders know how much I appreciate and how much the country appreciates their courage and bravery. Firefighters are on the scene and on the frontlines. The police have helped maintain order. Emergency medical teams have treated the sick. And our National Guard personnel is providing very important assistance. It turns out, when the President shows up, so does a lot of the other brass. I'm proud to be here with General Tuck [Blum]*, who runs the entire National Guard Bureau.

All of us associated with the Federal Government, Governor, are here to make sure that the resources at our disposal are deployed to help you. And that's why there's all kinds of people from all different Departments at the Federal level, to assess the needs, to listen to the concerns, and to respond. And that's exactly what we've been doing, and that's exactly what we'll continue to do.

As the Governor mentioned, I did issue an emergency declaration which allows Federal Agencies across the Government to help State and local authorities. It empowers FEMA to provide vital supplies as well as to pay emergency grants to help pay for the cost of firefighting, evacuation shelters, and traffic control.

Our Department of Agriculture and Interior have provided elite firefighters and equipment. As I mentioned, the Department of Defense is in this to help you through NORTHCOM. The military has got assets that we can help you with. General, thanks for coming. We've got a four-star general with us today. He runs NORTHCOM, and the reason he's here, Governor, is to listen to you, find out what assets we can continue to deploy to help you.

As the Governor mentioned, yesterday I signed a second declaration to help California's recovery and rebuilding efforts. The major disaster declaration authorizes the release of Federal funds for debris removal and long-term assistance to individuals and businessowners. People affected by the fires can now apply for assistance for temporary housing and home repair and low-cost loans to cover uninsured property losses.

Now, people here in this part of the world are wondering, is there a number they can call to get help? And here's the number: 1–800–621–FEMA. If you want to find out whether or not you qualify for help, Federal help, just call 1–800–621–FEMA or go to the web site FEMA.gov. And there's a third way that you can find out whether you get help, and that is through a mobile disaster recovery center that FEMA's deployed around this

* White House correction.