



JOINT LEGISLATIVE AUDIT COMMITTEE

JOHN HARABEDIAN, CHAIR
ASSEMBLYMEMBER, FORTY-FIRST DISTRICT

April 22, 2025

Members

Joint Legislative Audit Committee
1020 N Street, Room 107
Sacramento, CA 95814

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Dear Members of the Committee,

We respectfully request the Joint Legislative Audit Committee approve this request to audit prevention and response efforts related to the Eaton and Palisades Fires. An audit by the independent State Auditor would provide transparency to the public regarding local and state efforts. Additionally, the audit could potentially provide insight or recommendations for improving their ability to respond to future natural disasters.

The Eaton and Palisades Fires devastated the lives of thousands in Altadena, Pacific Palisades, Malibu, Sierra Madre, Pasadena, and Los Angeles. At least 18 Angelenos lost their lives in the Eaton Fire, many during the night in west Altadena. More than 6,000 homes across 22 square miles were destroyed, some more than two miles deep into Altadena. The Palisades Fire was every bit as devastating. At least 12 Angelenos lost their lives. When evacuation orders were given, some homes in the Palisades had already been burning for about 40 minutes. Traffic on evacuation routes were already in gridlock; many Angelenos were forced to abandon their vehicles and flee on foot. Fire crews then had to bulldoze the abandoned vehicles to make a path for fire and emergency vehicles.

Responsibilities

Under California's emergency response system, local governments (i.e., cities, counties, and special districts) are primarily responsible for responding to fires and other emergencies. They provide fire fighters, law enforcement officers, and emergency responders to address such things as fires, earthquakes, and floods within their jurisdictions. When a fire or emergency exceeds a local government's capacity to respond, it may request assistance from the State.

The California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) is the State's lead agency for coordinating resources to support local jurisdictions fighting fires and responding to emergencies. Cal OES can do such things as deliver emergency response equipment, distribute federal emergency funding, and coordinate the State's efforts related to fires and emergencies. Other state agencies can also play a role. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) can provide resources to fight fires, including significant aerial

resources. The California Health and Human Services Agency can coordinate actions to assist jurisdictions in meeting the needs of displaced evacuees. These needs may relate to food assistance, sheltering, and recovery.

Concerns & Challenges

Angelenos and media outlets have highlighted concerns regarding preparations and response efforts regarding the Eaton and Palisades Fires. These concerns range greatly, from the prepositioning of resources to the timing of evacuation orders. The LA Times reported that the LA Fire Department placed just nine extra fire engines in vulnerable areas ahead of the fires, a “much less aggressive defense than what had been done in the past, when as many as 50 engines” were activated for high-wind events. Not one fire engine was sent to the Pacific Palisades ahead of the fire. The former city fire chief, who was dismissed for failures in leadership during the fires, according to NBC Los Angeles, stated that the fire department lacked the resources it needed to protect Los Angeles during the fires.

The Wall Street Journal’s article titled “Botched Alerts Turned Suburb Into a Death Trap” detailed shortcomings in alerts regarding the Eaton Fire and the impact on west Altadena. As early as 7:26 p.m. on January 7, many Altadena residents east of Lake Avenue were told to evacuate. The fire burned for eight more hours before any alert went to Altadena residents who lived west of Lake Avenue. That night, 17 Angelenos in west Altadena lost their lives. The article also details how the emergency-alert system for radio and television was never used by the county. Similarly, the X account “ReadyLA-County,” which the County Office of Emergency Management uses “for disaster response, recovery and preparedness,” contained no post about the Eaton Fire that night.

Angelenos and media outlets have raised many other concerns about shortcomings and challenges that may have impeded efforts to fight the fires. These concerns include waterless fire hydrants and faltering water pressure during the fires. At least one reservoir was offline due to maintenance, making millions of gallons of water unavailable to fire fighters. Moreover, utility companies were unable to cut off electricity and gas, slowing emergency responders’ efforts.

The Eaton and Palisades Fires certainly posed many unique and overwhelming challenges that the LA Times stated may have “doom[ed] any response.” Chief among these challenges were the drought and Santa Ana winds. In January 2025, the vegetation was bone dry; Los Angeles had not received any kind of significant precipitation in months. Once ignited, the 90 mile per hour Santa Ana winds spread the fire about five football fields each minute. During the night, when the winds were spreading the fires the fastest, firefighting aircraft were also grounded because of the wind.

We appreciate our emergency responders who put themselves in danger to save so many Angelenos and fight the fires that threatened our city. We are truly thankful for their bravery and heroic efforts. They charge towards the fires while the rest of us flee. We are also thankful to every-day Angelenos who demonstrated what it means to be a hero, including the heroes at

Pasadena Transit who drove their buses through the flames to rescue 500 residents at senior living facilities in Altadena.

Audit Scope

The Eaton and Palisades Fires devastated countless lives, homes, and our very sense of security. Part of recovering and rebuilding from these tragedies requires us to thoroughly and impartially review these tragic events and try to prevent their reoccurrence. While this audit is not a silver bullet, it provides a valuable opportunity for the independent, non-partisan State Auditor to evaluate the fires and make recommendations that could potentially benefit local and state agencies.

The intent of this audit is to provide transparency and potentially helpful recommendations to improve fire prevention and response in Los Angeles County. While the Eaton and Palisades Fires were horrific events, they are all the more tragic if we do not learn from them. Further, Angelenos deserve the accountability and transparency that the nonpartisan, independent State Auditor can provide. We therefore ask the Joint Legislative Audit Committee to approve this audit request that will focus on, but not limited to, Los Angeles's fire departments, Cal OES, and CAL FIRE. The audit scope will include the following:

Fact Finding

- Identify the number and location of homes and other buildings destroyed and seriously damaged by the two fires.
- Identify the number and locations of the deaths resulting from the two fires. Further, identify, to the extent possible, demographic information regarding those who died, including but not limited to their ages, whether they had disabilities, and their ethnicities.
- Provide detailed timeline(s) regarding the ignition and progression of the fires; ground and aerial responses to the fires; request and provision of mutual aid; issuances of evacuation orders, etc.
- Provide independent analysis of the extent to which brush and vegetation management was previously done in the area where the fires occurred.
- Identify building codes intended to reduce the impacts and costs of fires, and to the extent information is available, any identified measurable successes regarding building codes.
- Determine whether state and local agencies timely informed elected officials of important decisions—after the fire occurred—so their partnership can add as much value as possible (e.g., decisions regarding the storage of toxic waste and cleaning up of destroyed businesses). Further, determine whether state and local agencies timely informed the public of important decisions that could impact them financially and otherwise.

Planning & Preparations

- Review any planning, forecasting, or modeling by the fire departments, CAL FIRE, Cal OES, and others that were applicable to the two fires. Determine whether the plans account for the positioning of resources, readying resources, activating resources, evacuation orders, etc. Determine whether the plans were followed and the asserted reasons for any deviations from those plans.
- Determine the extent to which planning included and accounted for the most vulnerable Angelenos who have access or functional needs, including older adults, Angelenos with disabilities, etc.
- Review any after action reports for the fires and follow up as needed to understand the impacts on future planning and preparation efforts.
- Identify the quantity and quality of ground and aerial resources prepositioned by fire departments and CALFIRE. Provide a detailed timeline for prepositioned resources and identify decision makers. Determine whether they were prepositioned in a logical, sufficient, and effective manner pursuant to industry standards, past practices, or best practices.
- Assess the extent to which the preparation efforts pertaining to the two fires were influenced by the season or time of year.

Activation of Resources

- Provide a detailed timeline regarding requests for assistance, including identifying who made the requests. Review the timeliness and responsiveness regarding requests for assistance, including but not limited to requests to local fire departments, Cal OES, CAL FIRE, military, civilians, etc.
- Review whether sufficient resources were made available and properly accepted and allocated, including but not limited to assistance offered by local fire departments, Cal OES, CAL FIRE, military, civilians, etc.
- Determine whether the locations of command centers were logical and consistent with any guidance and best practices.
- Determine the extent to which available resources—ground, aerial, and otherwise—were efficiently, effectively, timely, and safely used to fight the fires. Determine the impact wind speeds played in preventing the use of aerial and other resources and complicated efforts to suppress the fires.

Evacuations

- Review planning efforts related to the evacuation of the areas impacted by the fires. Determine whether traffic and road issues, geography, and other issues were adequately considered. Determine whether evacuation plans, protocols, and best practices were followed, the reasons for any deviations, and whether those deviations were justified.
- Identify the extent to which residents were notified or warned of fire risks before and after the fires ignited. Determine whether earlier notifications and warnings would have been practical or advisable.
- Provide a detailed timeline regarding evacuation orders, including the identification of who made relevant decisions. Account for any delays that are relevant to

evaluation orders, including any delays during the night. Assess the timeliness, appropriateness, and execution of evacuations orders before and during the fires.

Water & Utilities

- Identify the extent to which water for firefighting purposes was available to fire fighters during the two fires. Further, identify the reason for and extent of any lack of water.
- Determine whether redundancies in the provision of water for firefighting purposes, including obtaining water from the ocean, as is done in San Francisco, would have had a measurable impact on suppression efforts during the fires.
- Review protocols and efforts to shut off electricity and gas to allow firefighters to more effectively fight the fires.
- Determine whether the provision of water for firefighting purposes and the ability to shut off electricity and gas have been incorporated into planning for a major earthquake.

Thank you for your consideration of this audit request. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact my office at (916) 319-2041.

Sincerely,



John Harabedian, Chair
Joint Legislative Audit Committee
Assemblymember, 41st District