

Opening Statement
Chairman Bobby L. Rush
Subcommittee on Energy
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Joint Hearing on “Out of Control: The Impact of Wildfires on our Power Sector and the
Environment”
January 28, 2020

Good morning, today the Committee convenes for a joint subcommittee hearing to conduct oversight of an issue ravaging communities and plaguing the environment.

Often occurring on our nation’s west coast, an average of 73,000 wildfires burn 7 million acres of U.S. land each year. Though these fires are, in some cases, part of healthy ecosystems, their destruction has devastated communities, both here, at home, and around the world.

In this room alone, we have representation from areas recently hard hit by wildfires. This includes my colleagues from California, Oregon, Washington, and Colorado. Additionally, we are joined by a member of my staff from Australia whose community is still feeling the impact of recent wildfires.

According to the Fourth National Climate Assessment, the annual area burned in our nation’s western states alone could increase two to six times the current average by mid-century. Factors contributing to this projected uptick include climate change, urban development, poor vegetation management, and issues related to power lines.

Last year, California experienced historically catastrophic fires resulting in a tragic loss of life and unthinkable destruction to homes and properties. Of the known causes of California’s most disastrous fires, one half are linked to electric utility infrastructure. High winds, in particular, blow nearby vegetation into power lines and snap aging electrical infrastructure causing live wires to fall and ignite fires.

Since 2007, California regulators have permitted the use of Public Safety Power Shut-offs by electric utilities to prevent the ignition of wildfires during high wind events. However, long-term solutions, like microgrids and the hardening of our grid infrastructure, are necessary considerations as lengthy blackouts pose a risk to vulnerable populations and other ratepayers.

I thank our witnesses for their participation in today’s hearing and look forward to identifying concrete solution to these daunting problems. With that, I would like to yield the balance of my time to my friend and colleague, the gentleman from California, Mr. McNerney.