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Senator Feinstein Introduces Broad Legislation to Reduce Wildfire Risk to Communities, Boost Federal Disaster Aid

-Bills introduced as 2009 fire season looms in California-

Washington, DC – U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) today introduced a series of bills to encourage state and local governments to improve fire-prevention efforts in areas prone to wildfires, and to increase federal recovery aid to victims of wildfires and other major disasters.

"Catastrophic wildfire is one of the greatest long-term risks facing California," Senator Feinstein said. **"California is tinder-dry, we have extended droughts, and global warming is making these risks greater. We are seeing more of these fires, and they burn hotter and with more intensity. The results are devastating and tragic, and the damage is deep and lasting.**

"We can never eliminate the risk. But we can do more to protect against these wildfires, and to help the victims. These bills will do exactly that. They will ensure that all available means are employed to reduce the risk; that these fires are fought more effectively; and that aid reaches the victims who need it most."

The legislative package introduced today by Senator Feinstein includes three bills:

Fire Safe Communities Act: Establishes incentives for communities at risk of wildfires to adopt existing Fire Safe building codes and standards. For communities that have adopted these responsible codes, federal grants will be available to create "defensible space" around homes, to reduce hazardous fuels, and to replace flammable construction materials. It also increases federal reimbursement of firefighting costs to participating communities.

Mortgage and Rental Disaster Relief Act: Re-institutes a previously discontinued FEMA program to help qualified individuals displaced by major disasters make their mortgage payments.

Disaster Rebuilding Assistance Act: Boosts the maximum amount FEMA may provide to qualifying households to pay for temporary housing and home rebuilding costs. FEMA currently provides roughly \$28,000 in this assistance. This bill would increase this amount to \$50,000 for qualified households.

Following is a summary of the bills introduced by Senator Feinstein:

Fire Safe Communities Act

Would establish new incentives for communities at risk of wildfire to improve fire-prevention efforts. Key components include:

Establishing incentives for communities by changing the federal share of firefighting and emergency expenses reimbursed under FEMA's Fire Management Assistance Grants. Currently states and local communities can be reimbursed 75% of their firefighting and emergency service expenses if FEMA determines a fire threatens significant number of homes and structures. Under this bill, communities located in fire hazard areas that implement a nationally recognized wildland fire code, or have mandated the retrofit of structures known to be vulnerable to wildfire, would be eligible for 90% reimbursement of their firefighting and emergency expenses covered under the FEMA program.

Developing a \$25 million grant program to assist local communities implement the activities and policies of nationally recognized wildland fire codes and standards. These grants, administered by FEMA, can be used to enforce local ordinances and inspect for compliance, develop incentive programs to retrofit hazardous structures, create defensible space, and reduce hazardous fuel loads near communities.

Authorizing the US Forest Service and the Department of the Interior to offer grants to local communities for fire

safe practices.

Mortgage and Rental Disaster Relief Act

This bill addresses an important reality facing many disaster victims: although they have lost their homes, in most cases they must still make mortgage or lease payments – on top of paying for temporary lodging. Key components include:

Authorizing temporary mortgage and rental payments for households with adjusted gross incomes of \$100,000 or less, in high-cost states such as California. Households in lower-cost states could be eligible if their annual adjusted gross incomes do not exceed \$75,000.

Establishing qualification standards. Disaster victims must show they have suffered significant financial hardship, and are at imminent risk of foreclosure or eviction.

Making mortgage and rental assistance available to qualified individuals. Assistance would administered by FEMA, available for up to 18 months, in communities designated by the President as disaster areas.

Disaster Rebuilding Assistance Act

Many individuals whose homes are destroyed by natural disasters find that their insurance policies do not provide enough money to cover rebuilding costs. This bill is aimed at providing assistance to these underinsured disaster victims. Key components include:

Increasing the maximum amount of federal aid available for rebuilding and for temporary housing. This legislation would boost the assistance FEMA may provide to qualified households to \$50,000, up from roughly \$28,000 today.

Giving FEMA discretion, for disasters in high-cost states, to increase the \$50,000 cap, if necessary.

Making this assistance available only to low-income individuals who need help the most. To be eligible, annual household income must be below \$100,000.

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