

1.16.25 LA Wildfire Floor Speech

Thank you, Mr. President,

As you and everybody here knows that a little bit over a week ago, fires broke out in Los Angeles County.

And so many of you have reached out in the time since to offer your support, offer your assistance, and even offer condolences for those who have perished in this significant disaster. And I want to thank you for your initial outreach.

My colleague, Senator Schiff, and I have come to the floor today to provide you all a little bit of an update and to lay a foundation on some of the key issues that we're gonna need to work together on as we move forward.

And let me begin by just taking a step back for a second and acknowledging that even before the winds increased last week, we knew that the risk of a potential large fire was high.

In the midst of a historically dry season in Southern California, forecasters predicted hurricane force winds along with little to no humidity. Essentially a dry hurricane condition, if you can imagine that.

Californians know that when there's a red flag warning, conditions are ripe for large-scale fires.

But what came next — what actually materialized — would become the worst natural disaster in the history of Los Angeles.

100 mile-per-hour winds carrying burning embers from home to home, multiple simultaneous fires burning more than 12,000 structures and more than 40,000 acres. And to give you a sense of the area I'm talking about, I'm talking about nearly three times the size of Manhattan.

At least two dozen people have lost their lives, with more expected as search and rescue crews continue to comb through the devastation.

And over the course of the last week, I've had the opportunity to visit command posts and meet with firefighters; had the opportunity to distribute meals to many of the victims and to see, to tour, to visit the destruction firsthand.

Yes, there are survivors, people impacted from communities like the Pacific Palisades, some with names and faces that you'll recognize from television and the entertainment industry. But I assure you there's also a lot of other faces and families that you won't recognize from the working-class and diverse communities throughout Los Angeles County.

It's people like a woman in Altadena who was nine months pregnant when the Eaton Fire burned down not just her home, but the new nursery that she had prepared.

And it's the 66-year-old man who stayed to try to protect the home that had been in his family for five decades — but who was found dead with a garden hose in his hand. You can imagine his last moments.

It's one of the reasons that I've been saying over and over that every house you see is really a home, and every home represents a family.

A family who now mourns maybe the loss of a relative, maybe the loss of their home.

Or a loss of irreplaceable items like family photo albums. Or a wedding dress. Or baby pictures. Of a loved one's red, white, and blue military burial flag.

But through the destruction, we've also seen some signs of hope.

Like the firefighter in the Pacific Palisades who offered to go back and save two dogs trapped while the neighborhood was still burning.

Or a 14-year-old Avery, who saw the devastation that hit her community, and created a charity — “Altadena Girls” — to provide beauty products and clothes to her friends so that they could “feel like themselves” again while coping with this disaster.

Every day, we hear stories like theirs — even in the midst of a disaster, people coming to each other's aid.

But even as I stand here today, as we stand here today, the fires are still burning. And the fight continues.

Our hearts go out to all the impacted families and they also go out to the heroic firefighters and other first responders working tirelessly through multi-day shifts to put out these fires. Not only the brave state and local firefighters, but I want to acknowledge the federal firefighters, too.

To the state and local officials working day and night to protect our state and our communities, thank you. And I also want to acknowledge Governor Newsom for his steady hand during this time.

And we are so grateful to our neighboring states who continue to send resources.

And no, not just states that are considered blue states like Oregon and Washington, but states that many people refer to as red states like South Dakota and Wyoming and Montana and Florida who continue to send resources with no strings attached, no conditions. This is what we do for each other. There's a reason why it's called mutual aid.

And I also want to thank every one of my colleagues who in 2023 helped me secure seven C-130 air tankers for California. They were surplus military aircraft that California received and paid to retrofit — the first of which is already on the scene fighting these fires as we speak.

But soon there will come a time when we need to more than just support our response to these disasters. We'll need support for our recovery.

And we expect Congress to support California, just as Congress has been there for states across the country in their times of crisis — with no conditions and no strings attached.

Because our recovery isn't just a California fight. We're truly in this together as Americans.

[PAUSE]

Whether it's wildfires across the western United States, or tornados in the Midwest, ice storms in Texas, or hurricanes in the Southeast, Mother Nature does not distinguish between red states and blue states. And neither should our disaster response efforts or our recovery efforts.

That's why when tragedy struck just a few months ago from Hurricanes Milton and Helene, Democrats didn't demand aid be attached to some Democratic wish list of priorities.

Not for a second did we think of attaching strings.

So when I hear about political jabs and insults on social media while my home state is burning, it's not distracting. It's certainly not entertaining. It's offensive. And it is dangerous.

Because let's be clear: in times of crisis, California has always been there for the rest our country. And now, we expect our country to be here for California.

If Speaker Johnson or any member of Congress for that matter is worried about the federal debt, let me assure you, California's already paid the bill.

California, as you may know, is the largest economy of any state in the nation. We're the single largest contributor of tax revenue to the federal treasury by far. In 2022 alone, California paid \$83 billion more to the federal government than it received.

So from additional disaster assistance funding to a serious conversation about disaster insurance that I'm eager to continue — we're going to need everyone on board.

And to my Republican colleagues who may be wondering about whether the policy should change about no strings attached, let me remind you that this is also fundamental matter of decency as Americans.

It's the same decency that my colleague Senator Scott from Florida and my colleague Senator Tillis from North Carolina have shown in their public comments this last week. Or that several of my California House Republican colleagues have shown by supporting our state's major disaster declaration request.

They know, as we should all remember, that this is about our unity as a nation. So yes, California will need you for the long haul.

And to President-elect Trump, I too invite you to tour Altadena and Pacific Palisades, which, by the way, is just about 30 miles from your golf course in Rancho Palos Verdes.

Come meet the first responders. Come meet the families that have been affected by these wildfires.

And finally, I want to speak to the people of California because it is indeed a long road ahead. And there will be more challenges to overcome as we continue the search and rescue phase of this, as we go into the environmental remediation and the debris removal, and eventually the rebuilding of homes and businesses.

It's a long road and there will be challenges to overcome indeed, but I promise you this: that there will be a day when the fires are put out, when the homes and entire communities are rebuilt — better and more resilient than they've been before.

And the sun will shine. And the kids will smile. Together, we're gonna get through this.

Thank you, Mr. President.

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