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Thank you for reaching out and for the opportunity to share our perspective ahead of the January 14 hearing of the House Natural Resources Federal Lands Subcommittee.

Grassroots Wildland Firefighters appreciate the intent behind H.R. 4038, the Wildfire Response and Preparedness Act. We agree that response time matters in wildfire outcomes and that Congress should be examining how quickly federal resources are able to evaluate and respond to new ignitions on federal lands. However, we have significant concerns with the feasibility and potential unintended consequences of establishing a national 30-minute response-time standard without first addressing workforce capacity, funding, and operational realities.

From a workforce perspective, the primary constraint in federal wildfire response today is not policy direction—it is people. Federal land management agencies are experiencing persistent staffing shortages, high vacancy rates, and retention challenges driven by pay, classification, housing, and year-round employment limitations. In many regions, available resources are already stretched thin during peak fire season. Establishing response-time expectations without ensuring adequate staffing levels and sustainable work/rest protections risks shifting pressure onto an already overextended workforce.

Additionally, terrain, remoteness, weather, and detection limitations make a uniform national response-time standard operationally unrealistic. Many wildfires occur in rugged, inaccessible areas where rapid access is not possible without aviation support, which itself is constrained by availability, weather, daylight, and pilot and crew staffing. A mandated 30-minute evaluation standard could inadvertently incentivize unsafe decision-making or paper compliance rather than meaningful, risk-informed response.

With respect to your questions on current response times, there is no single national average that accurately reflects real-world conditions. Response time varies widely by region, fuel type, proximity to staffed resources, detection method, and time of day. Importantly, there is often a substantial gap between ignition and detection—particularly with lightning-caused fires, which can smolder undetected for hours or days before being discovered. In those cases, “response time” reflects detection limitations rather than agency urgency or performance.

Grassroots believes that before Congress sets national response-time standards, it should require comprehensive reporting on workforce capacity, vacancy rates, detection timelines, dispatch limitations, and aviation and ground resource availability. Without this context, response standards risk becoming aspirational metrics disconnected from the operational and human systems required to meet them safely.

In summary, Grassroots Wildland Firefighters supports efforts to improve wildfire response and transparency, but we urge caution in advancing mandates that are not aligned with current staffing, budgetary, and environmental realities. We would welcome amendments or parallel efforts that address workforce capacity and sustainability alongside response expectations.

Thank you again for engaging the wildfire workforce directly. Please do not hesitate to reach out if we can provide additional detail or technical insight.

Sincerely,

Lucas Mayfield

President, Grassroots Wildland Firefighters



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