

Opening Statement
The Honorable Adrian Smith, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Technology and Innovation
Committee on Science and Technology
U.S. House of Representatives
Markup of Firefighters grant programs

October 14, 2009

Mr. Chairman, thank you for calling this markup today to reauthorize the Department of Homeland Security's Firefighters grants programs.

The Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) program both provide much-needed assistance to fire departments across the nation and I thank you Mr. Chairman for working closely with me and with the leading fire services organizations to develop an agreeable compromise under which we can move this bill forward.

As we learned at our hearing in July and as I have heard in discussions with fire chiefs and firefighters in my District, the AFG program is frequently cited as a "lifesaver", and the only means by which many departments can acquire up-to-date equipment and training – which requires a significant portion of their budget – for their firefighters.

This is particularly true in the rural areas of my District where many communities rely upon all-volunteer departments to respond to fires and other emergencies. The equipment needed to fight fires and save lives and property is costly, and requires departments to have certain minimum response capabilities regardless of whether they are protecting a community of a few thousand people or a large city of a few *hundred* thousand people. As such, Firefighter grants have proven absolutely vital for rural and volunteer fire departments that have small tax bases and the least ability to acquire such equipment.

The bill before us today makes several modest changes to the AFG and SAFER programs, reflecting a compromise reached by the leading national fire service organizations that worked closely with the committee to develop this legislation.

I support these changes and the underlying reauthorization effort, but I do have some concerns and priorities that I hope to address as we go forward. In particular, and for the reasons I just mentioned, I want to ensure that the changes made in this legislation do not negatively impact the ability of smaller combination and volunteer departments to compete for and receive AFG grants, so I will be offering an amendment today that attempts to clarify the grant process in this respect.

I also want to note that funding for the AFG program has declined over the last few years, and is now far below both the currently authorized level as well as the level called for in this bill. I hope that as we go forward we can find a way to reverse this decline while also better aligning authorization levels with realistic and responsible expectations for appropriations.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman for working with us on reauthorization of these programs. I hope for and expect a continued smooth process as we go forward.