

House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security  
Hearing on H.R. 1759, the Managing Arson Through Criminal History (MATCH) Act

November 6, 2007

**Statement of Tracy Pansini, Fire Chief, City of Burbank**

Mr. Chairman, thank you for inviting me to provide testimony in support of H.R. 1759, the Managing Arson through Criminal History (MATCH) Act of 2007.

My name is Tracy Pansini and I am a veteran firefighter with 28 years of experience. Currently, I am the Fire Chief for the City of Burbank, California. Also, I am the vice president of Foothill Fire Chiefs Association and the California, Office of Emergency Services (OES) "Area C" coordinator. As coordinator, I represent 11 jurisdictions.

The MATCH Act could not have come at a better time when the ever so vibrant images of California burning dominate the media landscape. In an apocalyptic portrait of mesmerizing flames, dancing from home to home, that has caused more than 1 billion dollars in damage. Much of Southern California is ablaze, similar to what we saw in Texas and Oklahoma this year, Florida, Colorado, Arizona, Montana, Utah and many other states.

Some of the largest wildland fires have been related to arson. The massive "Santiago Canyon" fire continues to burn in Orange County where 26 homes have been destroyed and 28,000 acres scorched. More than 10 million dollars have been spent so far on just suppression. Families living in a supermarket parking lot with their children's pillows resting on asphalt soaked in puddles of motor oil. The "Buckweed" fire in Santa Clarita burned 35,000 acres and destroyed 26 homes and took the life of one resident. All confirmed arson related.

Criminals and arsonists anticipate the wind and they want to come out and do their thing. An out-of-state man is the focus on an investigation for one of San Diego's fires. It is reported that a resident arsonist from Missouri is the focus of the investigation. An email was sent to local fire departments suggesting that a person of interest was a convicted arsonist in Missouri. Maybe if we had this information available in a national database similar to the MATCH Act we could have prevented the conflagration that has currently consumed 2,000 homes.

What awaited many as they were allowed to return was what seemed to be a nuclear wasteland of entire streets consumed, autos turned into balls of blackened metal, the only thing left standing were the concrete chimneys that looked like dominos lined up and unsupported. Home after home – 30 on one street alone – reduced from places of love, pictures, mementos and family heirlooms to blackened concrete, charred rubble and twisted metal blanketed with grey and white ash.

Currently, we don't have any vehicle to track arsonists on the national level or state level for that matter. This is extremely important legislation to help us track arsonists nationally. Knowing that a convicted arsonist moved into Burbank would assist in an investigation of an arson fire. The MATCH Act would allow us to proactively screen local movement of arsonists. It has the

unique ability to link disparate dates and events with a human element at the local, state and federal level. It will be a tool and part of a system that can be used to strengthen the relationships of evidence with people on events and capabilities. It is natural to look to enhance it with other information of relevance to help us connect the dots in the investigation phase. The increased need post 9-11 and our recent fires nationwide make the passing of this bill critical.

An individual that committed an act of arson is likely to commit a future act. If we had the MATCH type of data base in place, we would have had the opportunity to find a prolific arsonist. He always used the same device as most arsonists do and perfected it under our noses. As a young fire captain, I remember chasing numerous fires set in trash cans littering the alleys of Burbank. I gave the device to our investigator, but, then as now, there was nothing in place to track the information with a human component. That arsonist was the infamous John Orr who went on to burn up 64 homes in Glendale, kill six in the Ole's Home Improvement fire in South Pasadena, destroy the Walton set on the Warner Brothers lot and burn business in all the surrounding communities. He went on to start hundreds fires in cities from central California to Southern California along the I-99 interstate. PBS did an hour long television show "Hunt for the Serial Arsonist" tracking Orr. HBO did an original movie "Point of Origin" based on the Joseph Wambaugh book about John Orr. John probably had a ten year run before being caught. It would help to have a data base. Then and now we use our network skills, but that is limited at best.

Generally, when it gets too hot for arsonists, they move to other areas. It is extremely important for investigating agencies to know when arsonists relocate to another area. We had a rash of 40 carport fires that spanned numerous jurisdictions and damaged many apartment buildings and displaced families. The arsonist had relocated from the Flatbush-area of New York. The local law enforcement had identified him as an arsonist so he relocated to the Los Angeles-area to continue his craft. Had we been able to use MATCH, we would have caught him sooner, or maybe he would not have moved in the first place.

Arson is the leading cause of fire in the United States. Arson fires are very costly in terms of human casualties and direct dollar loss. According to the U.S. Fire Administration, "Each year, an estimated 267,000 fires are attributed to arson, which result in 1.4 billion in property loss and cause over 2,000 injuries and 475 deaths". Locally, our arson fires account for 30% to 40% of our fire total. I Googled the term "Arson Fire" and received 420,000 sites.

In addition, arson is being used as a terrorist tool to negatively impact houses of worship, gang related fire bombings, and environmental terrorism. In 1996, Congress passed the "Church Arson Prevention Act," which expanded the options available to prosecutors, but did not provide any way of capturing the data and sharing the information on the incidents to local enforcement agencies.

Some acts of Arson are politically motivated. For example, here in Southern California, an environmental group, known as the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), committed arson to spread their message of protecting the environment. The ELF group fire bombed auto dealerships who sold poor gas mileage vehicles. Many dealerships were destroyed causing economic disruption to local cities.

As a result here in Burbank, as in many other communities, we have initiated an “Arson Watch” program. We have trained our community disaster volunteers (CDV) in what to look for and where to patrol. In October 2005, we experienced an arson fire in our foothills that consumed structures and vegetation in Burbank, Glendale and Los Angeles. One day prior, across the valley another arson wildland fire was started in Calabasas, Calif. That burned in the communities of Los Angeles City, Los Angeles County and Ventura County. Could the fires be related?

We need all of your support in passing this important legislation. Disaster volunteers, Arson Patrols and Vigilant enforcement are not enough. We need the MATCH Act!!!

Mr. Chairman, thanks again for allowing me to provide testimony in support of this important legislation.