



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER
BRAD LANDER

February 3, 2025

Commissioner Zach Iscol
New York City Emergency Management
165 Cadman Plaza East
Brooklyn, NY 11201

Re: New York City Wildfire Preparedness

Dear Commissioner Iscol,

In early January, drought conditions and 100 mile per hour winds ignited over 20 catastrophic wildfires in the Los Angeles region. The raging wildfires have resulted in 25 tragic deaths, evacuation of 200,000 Angelenos, and destruction of tens of thousands of homes and businesses. These fires are a sobering reminder of how quickly climate change can devastate entire communities.

Wildfires are not just a west coast concern; they have also emerged as a threat here in New York City. In the fall of 2024, New York City faced a record-breaking number of brush fires that resulted in unhealthy levels of air quality. Between November 1 to November 14, 2024, the FDNY responded to 271 brush fires across the five boroughs, affecting areas from Inwood to Prospect Park to Alley Pond Park. A year prior on June 5, 2023, New Yorkers awoke to eerily orange skies due to smoke from Canadian wildfires. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation issued an air quality advisory as the Air Quality Index rose to hazardous levels, peaking at 465. The City was slow to release guidance as New Yorkers scrambled to understand how to stay safe. At the time, Mayor Adams declared that there is “no blueprint or playbook for these types of issues” and that “there is no planning for an incident like this.”

It has become clear that wildfires, and the subsequent air quality emergencies that they cause, are now a climate risk that New York City must prepare for. Following the 2023 air quality emergency, I [asked NYCEM for their plans](#) to conduct after-action reviews. NYCEM stated that it began “working with agency partners to codify learned key actions and decisions in the City’s suite of emergency plans.” I appreciate NYCEM’s responsiveness to the previous request, as well as the ongoing work that NYCEM undertakes to keep New Yorkers safe in the face of many overlapping crises.

It is now more important than ever to stay ahead of the next climate emergency. In order to further advance the City’s preparedness as the threat of wildfires and air quality emergencies grow, my office respectfully requests the following information:

1. How does NYCEM proactively identify new or emergent hazards for which to initiate emergency planning?
2. What is the status of the air quality emergency plan that NYCEM committed to producing? Please share the final air quality emergency plan with our office.
3. What is NYCEM’s protocol for handling wildfire/brush fire emergencies?
4. Will NYCEM develop an emergency plan for wildfires/brush fires? If so, what is the timeline for such a plan?

5. Will NYCEM add wildfire/brush fires to its list of hazards covered in the NYC Hazard Mitigation Plan?
6. How does NYCEM learn and integrate best practices for air quality and wildfire/brush fire emergencies from other localities facing those hazards?

These questions build upon the [investigation](#) that our office conducted on the City's preparedness for Tropical Storm Ophelia that brought torrential rainfalls to New York City on September 29, 2023. The report that we produced included several recommendations for how to improve the City's emergency preparedness for heavy rainfalls, ranging from improving public outreach, building community capacity for preparedness and resiliency, improving catch basin cleaning procedures, implementing capital process reforms to accelerate stormwater projects, and strengthening interagency coordination of storm operations. We respectfully request an update on the administration's implementation of these recommendations.

We kindly request a response to our questions by February 17, 2025. Thank you for your continued service to New Yorkers and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B. Lander", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Brad Lander
New York City Comptroller