



STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE

THE

COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS,
AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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“FEMA: The Current State of Disaster Readiness, Response and Recovery”

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Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Titus, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the state of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). We value this committee's legislative support and oversight of our agency, and I look forward to our conversation today.

FEMA has a powerful mission statement, spelled out in just seven words: helping people before, during, and after disasters. That mission statement is our North Star, and it reflects a deep and abiding commitment of the FEMA workforce to our nation, its people, and public service.

I can say, without hesitation, that our mission at FEMA has become more challenging and complex. We can no longer really speak of a disaster "season." On average, we are seeing a disaster declaration every three days. From atmospheric rivers in January to tornados and wildfires in December, we now face intensified natural disasters throughout the year, often in places not used to experiencing them. In just the last several months, we have seen disasters ranging from record flooding in Vermont, to the deadliest wildfire in over a century on the island of Maui, to the first tropical cyclone to make landfall in California since 1938, and the gulf coast of Florida impacted by three hurricanes over the last year. In recent days, we witnessed the explosive intensification of Hurricane Lee strengthen from a Category 1 to a Category 5 storm in less than 24 hours. FEMA continues to closely monitor all potential disaster activity.

It is vital that FEMA – and the American people – be able to tap into an adequately funded Disaster Relief Fund so that we can continue to respond as soon as disaster strikes, rebuild in their aftermath, and prepare for future disasters. We strive to be vigilant stewards of taxpayer dollars, and we are careful in our projections of how much funding will be required for the Disaster Relief Fund. However, there are times when the number and intensity of disasters outpaces appropriated funds, and we find ourselves in such a moment today. The Administration has requested a supplemental funding package that includes \$16 billion for the Disaster Relief Fund, and these funds are necessary to ensure that our disaster recovery work around the nation can proceed without further delay. I urge Congressional approval of both the Administration's FY 2024 budget and its supplemental requests as soon as possible.

As a result of the dwindling Disaster Relief Fund, on August 29, FEMA implemented Immediate Needs Funding (INF) for the first time since 2017, and only the eighth time since 2001. In implementing INF, we are prioritizing lifesaving and life sustaining disaster response, and delaying obligations for longer term work. As a result, we have needed to pause obligations to over 1,000 Public Assistance projects across the country worth over \$1.5 billion. This includes delayed reimbursements for projects such as the repair of facilities damaged or destroyed by past disasters across America. Each week creates additional financial burdens on state, local, Tribal, and territorial (SLTT) governments and eligible nonprofits who are waiting on reimbursements from the federal government. These applicants represent communities across the country, including small, rural, and under resourced municipalities. You have my commitment that FEMA will move quickly to resume obligations paused under INF as soon as the Disaster Relief Fund is replenished.

Of course, to be effective, FEMA requires not only funding, but a well-trained workforce ready to deploy at a moment's notice. We have both national and regional personnel at the ready to

support lifesaving and life-sustaining response operations, including four National and 13 Regional Incident Management Assistance Teams; 28 Urban Search and Rescue Teams; and 36 Emergency Communications Teams. But the vast majority of our 22,000-person workforce consists of reservists. And I would like to thank this Committee and Congress for taking a huge step in helping us recruit and retain reservists, by passing the Civilian Reservist Emergency Workforce (CREW) Act last fall, which extends to our reservists the job protections of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act. FEMA is currently surveying existing and onboarding reservists on their awareness, utilization, and perceived effectiveness of the CREW Act. However, from personal interactions with reservists, I can assure you that this legislation is unquestionably improving our recruitment, retention, and training efforts. Further, the CREW Act has allowed some cadres with more technical or specialized duties, such as Financial Management, to tap into pools of professionals who have not previously been available to us as they did not want to risk losing their primary employment.

Just as FEMA is working to improve the readiness of our workforce, we must also work to constantly improve our programs and the technology we use to accomplish our mission. For example, we are further investing in geospatial technology to help improve the efficiency of our operations. After Hurricane Ian impacted Florida, our geospatial analysis allowed us to expedite remote damage assessments for private homes and buildings, eliminating the need for an in-person inspection in many cases. Assessments were conducted using artificial intelligence, crowdsourcing, and high-resolution imagery from satellite, air, and ground, enabling us to distribute more than \$78 million in disaster assistance into the hands of more than 5,600 disaster survivors much more quickly than with traditional methods.

Another key element of helping communities recover from a disaster is getting roads open and neighborhoods cleaned up. To do this as quickly as possible following Hurricane Ian, we implemented a unique Rapid Debris Removal Task Force that used a combination of satellite, fly-over, and on-the-ground data to quickly identify areas where the debris was particularly concentrated and to clear 19 million cubic yards of debris—enough to fill more than 5,800 Olympic size swimming pools—within six weeks across the hardest hit areas. This was months faster than we have been able to do with past storms.

FEMA is also using remote sensing technology to provide a better inspection experience for survivors impacted by the Hawaii wildfires. In Maui, remote sensing technology is being utilized to match homes listed in Individual Assistance registrations with detailed map images. When a match is made, the survivor's case information is updated and shared with the FEMA Housing Inspector. This information helps inspectors to know which homes were destroyed, allowing them to meet survivors more quickly where they are. As an agency, we will continue to leverage technology to help improve our "people first" focus.

FEMA is not only a response and recovery agency. We also work to mitigate the worst impacts of disasters before they occur. Hazard mitigation saves lives, results in less complex disaster recoveries, and can help us to break the cycle of disaster damage, reconstruction, and repeated damage. Through close collaboration with other federal agencies, state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, community-based organizations, and the private sector, FEMA is positioning itself as a true *resilience* agency.

One of the most important ways to build resilience across our country and save lives is through adoption of hazard-resistant building codes. Communities that have adopted current building codes have avoided at least \$32 billion in losses from natural disasters since 2000 alone, which will translate into over \$130 billion in estimated savings by 2040. In the aftermath of Hurricane Idalia, I surveyed damage and met with survivors in Horseshoe Beach, a small community on the tip of a peninsula in Florida's Big Bend region. This area received the brunt of Idalia's wind and storm surge but many of the buildings survived the storm and remained livable. I spoke with one survivor who owned several properties that sustained minimal damage – when I asked him why he thought his homes were minimally damaged, he responded: “I built to code and codes work.” However, two out of three communities in the United States have not yet adopted up-to-date building codes, which means there are roughly 220 million people at higher risk from the growing impacts of natural disasters. In order to help close this gap, FEMA is implementing a national strategy to incentivize the adoption of disaster-resistant building codes.

Another way in which FEMA is working to increase the resiliency of our nation is by providing new types of financial support to our State, Local, Tribal, and Territorial (SLTT) partners for mitigation projects. I would like to thank this Committee and Congress for the strong bipartisan support for the Safeguarding Tomorrow through Ongoing Risk Mitigation (STORM) Act, which authorized FEMA to create the Safeguarding Tomorrow Revolving Loan Fund program. These revolving loan funds will give local governments another tool to finance projects to reduce their risks from natural hazards and disasters. In implementing these and other mitigation programs, we are working to eliminate the barriers that small, rural, and other communities with limited capacity may face when seeking mitigation funding. FEMA recently announced the first funding opportunity for the STORM program and selected seven states and the District of Columbia to fund their revolving loan programs through a capitalization grant. These revolving loan funds will support a wide range of local government mitigation needs, including flood control, retrofitting for wind mitigation, and funding for projects to protect infrastructure such as public housing, water treatment facilities, dams, levees, and coastal structures. These funds can also be used as the local cost share for other FEMA mitigation grants. Each of the eight recipients selected will use this funding based on their unique hazard mitigation needs and priorities.

I also want to thank this Committee and Congress for the significant investment in the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grant program. To date, the Administration has announced nearly \$4 billion in available funding to states, local communities, Tribal Nations, and territories to undertake hazard mitigation projects. For the FY22 BRIC total grant cycle, 54 states and territories, as well as the District of Columbia, have been selected to receive funding, pending the outcome of the final review process. This also includes 34 tribes. An example project from the FY 2022 BRIC application period is in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, where a project will help harden power infrastructure to protect residents, essential businesses, and emergency service providers from hurricane-force winds, as well as upgrade poles and wire to withstand 150-mph winds and lightning strikes. As a result, the project should decrease the risk of power outages to residents and critical facilities.

Having served as a firefighter and emergency manager at most levels of government, I understand – as you do – what disasters mean from the local stakeholder perspective. From my current position, I see the unwavering dedication of our FEMA workforce to supporting

people across our nation before, during, and after disasters, facing what is, in many cases, the worst tragedy of people's lives. Our FEMA workforce demonstrates the very best of America, and I am committed to supporting them in every way possible. I ask you to ensure that the workforce has the resources it needs for its mission – to help protect the lives, homes, and well-being of the American people at times when they need our help the most.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.