

Chair DeFazio and Ranking Member Graves, thank you for holding this hearing on advancing our country's surface transportation and infrastructure.

Above the doors of the National Transportation Safety Board academy there is an inscription. It reads: "From tragedy we draw knowledge to protect the safety of us all."

By pulling together stakeholders from industry, law enforcement, and all levels of government, the NTSB has realized this goal time and time again. As members of the committee may know, fatalities from aviation accidents are down 99% since the board was founded in 1967.

It is far past time to take a similar approach to learning and evaluation in emergency management, and that is why I urge the committee to include my proposal for a National Disaster Safety Board in this legislation.

The National Disaster Safety Board, or NDSB, would be a non-partisan, independent government body. It would review management of natural hazards with a holistic approach, evaluating the response at all levels of government, in the private sector, and through non-profits.

I say natural hazards and that's for a reason. Disasters are what happens when human beings make the wrong decisions in an emergency. Disasters can be avoided, but natural hazards like fires and hurricanes cannot.

The NDSB would address the problem we currently face where an alphabet soup of state and federal agencies each conduct their own lessons-learned process, and each draw their own parochial conclusions.

It would address a related problem, which is that these different reviews use different data, make disparate recommendations, and are scattered across the internet--when they're publicly available at all.

Take the example of my home state of California and the 2018 Camp Fire.

By any metric, the Camp Fire was historic.

The deadliest fire in the U.S. in a century.

The biggest environmental cleanup in the history of California.

The most expensive natural disaster in the world during a year that included hurricanes Michael and Florence.

These are terrible statistics. What they are not, is lessons.

The lessons are scattered across half a dozen government reports, from the Butte County District Attorney's Office, to National Institute of Standards and Technology, to the California office in charge of watersheds.

Each looked at the Camp Fire from a particular point of view. None had the credibility or the mandate to do a 360 degree review and say: "this is how we save lives next time."

That is a problem, and one I imagine almost every member of this committee has experienced in their own state.

If we had a board like this, we might start to find patterns. We might recognize that wildfires in California have more in common with floods in Louisiana than we realized--and perhaps common solutions as well.

The Camp Fire was a disaster not only because of physical destruction, but because it forced the evacuation of more than 50,000 people who then needed food, shelter, and medical care.

That was a huge challenge, but not a new one in many parts of the country. Of the 916,000 people across the country who were displaced by natural hazards in 2019, most were displaced by floods or storms.

Do the evacuation procedures, emergency networks, and other systems we have in place in California reflect the lessons learned over the years in Florida, or Texas?

The National Disaster Safety Board will provide the independent, non-partisan analysis and recommendations to make sure that the answer to that question is “yes.”

In the few minutes I have remaining, I want to address another important way for the Committee to protect taxpayers dollars and encourage smart policy making.

From the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, to the CARES Act last year, we have seen the importance of oversight and accountability and when Congress jumpstarts the economy.

That is especially important in the case of this infrastructure bill, because we are aiming to reorient our economy to meet the existential threat of global warming.

When it comes to electrification of the transportation sector, this will require coordination between the private sector, multiple government agencies, and all 50 states.

This is a recipe for confusion and delay, and so I encourage the committee to make sure that, when it comes to building up zero emission vehicles and charging infrastructure, the government has somebody in charge.

Not a working group, not an office with an acronym, but a person who is empowered and can say “the buck stops with me on electric vehicles.” And I hope to hear the testimony of that person in the not-too-distant future.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to testify here today. I look forward to working together on this vital legislation.

I yield back.