

Statement of Rhonda Wiley

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Before the

Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management

Hearing on

“An Assessment of Federal Recovery Efforts from Recent Disasters”

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What occurred:

March 15, 2019 the Missouri River Flood that had been affecting Iowa and Nebraska made it to Northwest Missouri. The first levee to begin to over top in Holt County followed shortly by other levees in both Atchison and Holt Counties. The Missouri River Flood of 2011 had so many of us thinking we had experienced the worst, and nothing would ever compare to that flood. We were wrong. 2011 was a practice run for what we are now experiencing in 2019. The flood of 2011 lasted around 90 days before waters receded and recovery could begin in full force. It took years to rebuild from that flood. Today we are into month 7 of this flood... 228 days of response to a flood.....228 days of communities wanting to recover, trying to find the new normal, waiting for highways to be rebuilt, rejoicing when water recedes for a couple weeks in areas we were unable to access, only experience the pain of losing it again when the river again takes those areas back. A disaster that spans over multiple states, such as this disaster, and lasts for weeks, months, even quite possibly over a year, must be responded to differently than other natural disasters. A historic disaster requires a historic recovery.

I am not here to debate the how's and why's of flooding. That is not my job. My role in this disaster is response and recovery. I am here to portray the challenges of recovery when the disaster is ongoing. Disasters normally hit an area, cause damage, then flooding moves down stream, tornadoes dissipate, fires burn out, winter blizzards and ice storms are replaced with spring flowers and warmer temperatures. These flood waters are not receding. We have 14 breaks in Atchison County Federal Levees. Those levees protect 166 homes, 1295 agricultural buildings, 14 businesses, and 74,314 acres of farm ground, that produce corn, soybeans, and beef cattle. They also protect infrastructure which includes 121.3 miles of county roadways, 8 state highways and 3 US Highways as well as Interstate 29. Again, this is in Atchison County. Holt county levees are considered non-federal (supported 80% federal funding and 20% local

funding). They incurred 27 breaks which meant their levee system too is totally destroyed by this historic event. Those levees protected 406 homes, 95,000 acres of farmland, 30 businesses, 115 miles of county roads, 6 State Highways, as well as Interstate 29.

Both communities have suffered economic impact never before known. The loss of revenue due to the closure of I-29 when it was destroyed by water, (just north of the Missouri/Iowa border), was devastating to small businesses. I-29 was closed from March 15<sup>th</sup> to May 8<sup>th</sup>, and then again May 29<sup>th</sup> to June 18<sup>th</sup>. The months it took to rebuild and then open the interstate caused loss of revenue to local businesses, which in turn caused layoffs and loss of sales tax to already hurting small rural county governments and cities. Population for Atchison County is roughly 5000 persons (550 square miles). Holt County is roughly 4500 persons (470 square miles). This corner of Missouri is a perfect example of rural America. Sparsely populated area, that produces large numbers of our Nation's supply of yellow corn, soybeans and white corn (food grade for products such as corn chips). We even produce popcorn! We are truly the beating heart of the heartland.

#### Impact:

Individual Assistance was granted to residents who experienced flooding after April 29<sup>th</sup>. Those who were affected from March 15<sup>th</sup> to April 29<sup>th</sup> only received assistance if they still had water in their homes on or after April 29<sup>th</sup>. This has been detrimental to our small rural communities. Individual assistance is granted on the basis of number of homes destroyed or majorly damaged. When the flood actually started on March 15<sup>th</sup>, not enough homes were majorly damaged or destroyed for these communities to qualify for Individual Assistance. On and After April 29<sup>th</sup> Missouri suffered more floods and was struck by tornadoes and therefore anyone who still had water in their homes on April 29<sup>th</sup> or after qualified. Those who did not have water in their home, (even though they had not been able to move back in due to flood waters), did not qualify.

I'd like to share an example of a community who "mitigated" themselves out of individual assistance and now may never recover from this flood. Craig, MO. Population 248 (census data 2010) small town with a booming mom and pop café, convenience store, post office, bank, a school, a couple churches, an ethanol plant, seed and fertilizer company and of course a grain elevator. In 2011 they were able to construct a dirt levee derived from fields around the town and protect it. This spring when the threat of a flood came, they once again mitigated by constructing a dirt levee around their town. The City of Craig could not afford such emergency measures, so the local farmers and agricultural workers came with tractors, trucks, back hoes and track hoes, bulldozers and their own fuel and time. They constructed the levee and give this community hope that they will once again survive another historical flood. The temporary levee gave way and homes were majorly damaged and the entire town was flooded. As soon as

waters began to recede Craig began to clean up and organize their recovery. They began hauling away the corn stalks stacked four feet high in some areas, tearing out the sheet rock of their homes and business and putting things back as best they could. Most homeowners weren't able to go back to their homes because of the amount of destruction. Their homes had water under, around, or in their basements for weeks. The local school relocated 14 miles south of Craig to a church that was willing to become a school for grades K-12 Monday-Friday until the school building could be cleaned, repaired, and safe again. River of Hope Fellowship was Craig RIII School District from mid-March through mid-May. Now let's fast forward to the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of May. Once again the forecast for the Missouri River was increasing and also once again the Citizens of Craig, Mo decided to beef up their levy around their town in order to protect it from further damage....to mitigate....to do for themselves.....to reduce further damage.

When the flood waters began to inundate again, the levees held, and the town was able to successfully mitigate further damage from occurring. Even though this town had not recovered by May, they wanted to protect what they had left. By doing this, their citizens now are suffering through this disaster with little to no outside assistance. They were told they had to be under water on April 29<sup>th</sup> to qualify for individual assistance. It didn't matter they were not living in their homes because their homes were not repaired from the first inundation of the flood, all that mattered was the dates. Anything before April 29<sup>th</sup> did not qualify. My point is this. You cannot apply rules from one disaster to the next and expect it to cover the impact. Historical flooding does not inundate and then just go away a couple days later. This historical flood of 2019 is now on day 228, tomorrow will 229, next March 15<sup>th</sup> will be a year and we expect to still be experiencing historic flooding. Should Craig tear down their levee so that their citizens can be impacted by flood waters again in hopes that they will receive assistance to recover? No, that's not what rural communities do. Craig will rebuild, Watson will rebuild, Big Lake, Fortescue, Forrest City, all these small towns will find a new normal and somehow survive. But it isn't easy, they don't expect it to be. They aren't afraid of the hard work that comes with recovery, they just don't understand the whys of why won't FEMA help us like they help other areas? Why are there two separate dates for the same flood that started in March and is seemingly never ending. As an emergency manager, flood plains administrator it is so very difficult for me to explain why people that are flooded from a hurricane or flash flood receive help and yet our communities are damaged from a historical flood that is ongoing and they are receiving little to no assistance. Believe it or not, because of the date issues, FEMA has now asked some residence to refund what was given to them because they mistakenly gave them assistance and they do not qualify due to the April 29 date discrepancy.

Unfortunately, the program guidelines established for Individual Assistance, which is vital to the recovery of our small communities has been denied to many of the residence who are trying to rebuild after the flood. Again, we are sparsely populated, so very few numbers but yet in rural America every number does count. When your population is 5000 or 4500 and you have 50-100 persons that cannot recover and must relocate due to their economic situation, this is a huge economic impact on small rural communities that are already suffering from

population loss with every census! Over 60 miles of devastation from the Iowa State Line (Atchison County) to southern portion of Holt County. If a disaster affects a 5-mile area of a densely populated urban area they qualify for Individual Assistance because of the number of homes that have been majorly damaged or destroyed. In rural America, communities suffer through their losses alone, with little to no assistance for recovery because they choose to live a quiet life in small agricultural communities. Agricultural communities are the “meat and potatoes” (and corn chips) of our nation. Without sparsely populated areas, there would be no space that supports and produces our nation's supply of corn, soybeans, and popcorn. When a few of our citizens have to relocate because of a flood disaster that seemingly won't end, the economic recovery of our communities is greatly affected. Atchison County had 166 homes impacted by this flood. Holt County had 406 homes. How we as a nation respond to disasters should be determined by the impact of the disaster and the area, not by a general blanket set of rules applied to every disaster in every area. Rural and Urban communities are not the same and require different responses in order to economically recover after a disaster.

Another economic impact that has greatly affected Atchison and Holt Counties is the loss of US Highways 159 and 136. Both of these highways provide travel to and from Nebraska/Kansas. Our communities as well as Nebraska and Kansas Communities rely on these roadways to travel to and from their jobs. Because both roadways have been damaged in the flood and have been closed for months, the persons who work across the river in Nebraska and Kansas have incurred huge economic impact to their lives. In order to get to and from work they now have to drive 2.5-3 hours where before they were driving 20-30 minutes. Some families have picked up and relocated across the river. Some families are living separately because one parent works on the Missouri side of the river and the other parent works on the Nebraska/Kansas side of the river. They now have house payments/rent in two different states and their families are torn by this flood both emotionally and financially, yet they have never had flood waters in their homes. They have suffered enormous loss and will receive no assistance, yet the impact has been as difficult for them as it has to those who had four feet of water in their homes. They cannot recover until the roads open and then it could be years before they are able to recover financially. Some of these families have left our communities permanently and this will also add to the economic impact on our little corner in rural America.

We have 24 businesses in Atchison County that have had direct economic impact from the flood. Some are recovering, some are not. Some will never recover and have closed their doors forever. A business along the I-29 corridor suffered economic injury for weeks while it was closed. A few businesses also suffered due to the closures of Highways 136 and 159. They had several employees living across in Nebraska and Kansas and they were unable to continue their employment. These small businesses are very important to local public entities who rely on sales tax to stay afloat. For example, both Atchison and Holt counties rely on a half cent sales tax to run their 911 Public Safety Answering Point. There is no Wal-Mart in either county. Without these small businesses along the I-29 corridor these counties could not survive economically.

Another impact that has greatly affected not only us here in Northwest Missouri but also the nation as a whole is the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF). The Federal and Non-Federal levees protect the railroad tracks. The BNSF system travels through our flood plains and carries interstate commerce all over our great nation. Such commerce includes coal to both the east coast and to the west coast, is my understanding, and the BNSF Railroad has been rebuilding, repairing, moving, raising, and working to reestablish their route since shortly after the floodwaters began rising. They have literally been determined to fix it come hell or highwater. The contractor has pushed water only to watch it wash out in another location. They have reconstructed it higher and higher trying to get their trains back on the track. We need the railroad in our area. They transport our grain products to the nation. We want those trains back on the tracks taking care of commerce throughout our nation. However, we also need them to abide by rules laid out that protect, prevent, and mitigate damage to life and properties within the flood plains. An individual is not allowed to construct a new piece of property without a flood plain permit. They are also not allowed to repair damages to a structure that has been greater than 50% damaged in a disaster. When you have a railroad building a railroad track higher and stronger and they do not include proper under flow this creates a levee that causes water to hold at higher levels. Higher levels cause homes and businesses that have never before seen flood water to now flood. When the water backs up to the tracks or beyond and is trapped on the outside water is then pushed over on the properties of private citizens. This poses a huge risk to properties and life safety. BNSF Railway should have to at least make an attempt to be a good neighbor. They should follow local ordinances and federal guidelines laid out by the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) just like other individuals and businesses have to. In order to have good neighbors you must be a good neighbor. BNSF needs to be a good neighbor and ensure their railway is built up with proper under flow as to not cause damage to their neighbors in ALL flooded counties in multiple states that their railway spans throughout the flood plains of the United States.

Moving Forward:

Missouri Counties have had such great support from our State and Federal Partners. Both have been supportive in our response and recovery. Where the gap lies is in the fact that this disaster is very different from other disasters and the recovery process must be adjusted to fit the disaster. March 16<sup>th</sup> was our first water rescue this year due to flooding and the last water rescue thus far was September 30<sup>th</sup>. Six and a half months of periodic water rescues in areas that are normally fields of corn and soybeans is a perfect example of the challenges of recovery when we are stuck in response mode. With disasters, recovery should begin when response ends. That is how it is supposed to be right? We plan for a disaster, we mitigate in order to prevent losses that can be prevented, then we respond when a disaster hits, and finally we build back. We pick up, clean up, and build back. This normal process is not occurring in Missouri and in some parts of Iowa and Nebraska where flooding isn't going away. We are

continuing to receive waves of inundation over and over again. The threat of flooding is continuing because of high river levels and because of the amount of destruction to the levee systems from north of Omaha, Nebraska and reaching as far south as northern Andrew County in Missouri. These levee systems have been utterly destroyed which is historic. The levee system was built in the 50's and although there have been a few compromises over the years, nothing compares to the 14 breaks in

Atchison County and the 27 breaks in Holt County. All levees in Atchison are Federal Levees which means the local (tax supported) levee districts maintain them. However, they must follow the rules laid out by the Corp of Engineers (COE) and the COE pays 100% of the major repairs when a federal disaster has been declared due to flooding. Holt County levees are in the 80/20 program which is a cost sharing program with the COE when a federal declaration has been declared. In Atchison County the COE contracted with a company that has hired local skilled farmers and skilled farm workers to run the heavy equipment. They have constructed temporary sand levees in the two northern inlet breaches of the L550 levee. Hiring local skilled workers was a win-win for both the contractor and also the local communities whose farmers could not plant due to the flood waters. Because these repairs are constructed of the sand washed into the area fields and with some rock, they are considered temporary and may or may not hold. These levee repairs thus far have amounted to around \$22 million. We are greatly appreciative of the COE's quick response to close these major inlets and stop enough of the flow of the river in our county to begin repairs on US Highway 136. US Highway 159 has been under water several times. Repairs were made to re-open only to be inundated once more by floodwaters and the repairs to once again be made. Repairs have been made twice on US 159 (which provides access to a bridge to Nebraska). Now it is currently under water again and when those water recede repairs will no doubt be made again. This is a continuous cycle of destruction/repair/destruction/repair. Why are we not mitigating? US 136 is scheduled to be opened on Friday the 18<sup>th</sup>. It has had huge holes repaired, shoulder drop offs up to five feet deep, bridge repairs, and road resurfacing. Why are we not mitigating? Building it back better? Building it back with proper under flow and elevations that will prevent flooding from destroying it again? I can tell you why. In order for the repairs to be covered by federal disaster dollars it has to be repaired back to how it was before the flood. If the Missouri Department of Transportation were to mitigate this segment of highway from Rock Port to the Missouri River from further damage, there would be no federal support. Therefore, we continue to build it back just as we did in 2011. We will continue to build it back and watch as the flood waters wash it away again probably next year. If we do not change how we respond to disasters such as flooding along the Missouri River and others, we will continue to watch taxpayer dollars wash away. The COE has spent approximately \$22 million to temporarily repair two inlet breaches. While these breaches were very large, they could be measured in yards, not miles. The cost to build a whole new levee system north of US 136 is \$35 million according to estimates I've received from our levee sponsors. Our levee sponsors and the COE both agree that setting the levee's back and building a whole new system could actually be cheaper than

repairs and would also better protect the lives and properties in Atchison County. They are working together to decide if and when this can happen. For this to occur it will take partnerships from various agencies coming together to sort out the details which must include finances for purchasing the ground to construct the new levee system. What I am saying is if we use common sense and mitigate, we can actually protect lives, property, AND save taxpayer money. As a floodplains administrator it is my job to see to it the citizens of our county are adhering to our local flood plains ordinance which requires anyone whose home is substantially damaged by a flood to either elevate (two feet above base flood elevation or higher), pick up their home and move it out of the flood plains, OR tear it down. If their home is damaged greater than 50%, they cannot just go in, make the repairs back to what it was before the flood and wait for the next flood to hit. As homeowners they MUST mitigate to protect from further damage. And yet as public agencies we do not adhere to this tried and true methodology of mitigation. As the Atchison County Flood Plains Administrator, I have to tell our citizens to do as we say not as we do. Public agencies are wasting taxpayer money by building back as it was and waiting for the next round of flood water inundation. We do not allow our citizens to do this with their personal properties, WHY are we as government agencies not holding ourselves to the same standards?

I want to thank you for this opportunity to be here today in order to share. I will be happy to answer your questions as best I can.