

STATEMENT
OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY
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“Preparedness, Response, and Rebuilding: Lessons from the 2017 Disaster”

Submitted
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Introduction

Good morning, Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Committee. My name is Brock Long, and I am the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss the historic disaster season of 2017, the lessons we've learned, and my plans for the future of FEMA.

I have been in office for just over eight months, and I am proud to be part of an agency that, every day, is helping communities reduce the risks associated with future disasters, as well as assisting disaster survivors all across the country. Shortly after I was sworn in, Hurricane Harvey struck Texas and Louisiana. Then, Hurricane Irma swept through the Caribbean, striking the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Georgia, South Carolina, the Seminole Tribe of Florida, and the entire state of Florida. Hurricane Maria followed, striking a devastating blow to the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. These hurricanes were followed by devastating wildfires and mudslides in California.

My team at FEMA has been working around the clock for more than six months to support the needs of the survivors of these disasters. We have worked tirelessly to support state, local, tribal and territorial (SLTT) partners to respond to and recover from disasters, and to mitigate against future disasters. We have faced and overcome many challenges, but we have a long way to go in some areas. In my testimony today, I would like to share with you some of our experiences in recent months, the lessons we are learning in this historic time, my strategic vision for the future of FEMA, as well as the next steps FEMA is taking to prepare for disasters.

2017 Hurricane Season Review

Last year's historic hurricane season was a true test of the Nation's ability to respond to and recover from multiple concurrent disasters. Three major hurricanes -- Harvey, Irma, and Maria - - made landfall along the Gulf Coast, in the Southeast, and in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The impacts of these storms, in addition to the California wildfires, cannot be overstated. Roughly 47 million people were affected by these events – roughly fifteen percent of the entire U.S. population.

In order to deliver disaster assistance to such a large and dispersed number of survivors, FEMA worked in concert with our federal partner agencies, SLTT governments, and also non-governmental organizations (NGO) and the private sector to ensure a unity of effort that serves the needs of disaster survivors.

In disaster response operations, FEMA's sole focus is saving lives and protecting property. We train, exercise, and evaluate our planning assumptions with our SLTT partners. We make plans based on the best information we can gather from the public and private sectors about the impacts that different types of threats may have on a community or region. We know that no disaster ever goes according to our plans, so we must adapt to the circumstances as they develop. It is not possible to successfully respond to the impact of a major hurricane without errors. But our goal is to ensure that any errors that occur are a result of overestimating need, not underestimating it. It is easy to forget that in addition to Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, we also had two other major hurricanes threaten our nation – Hurricanes Jose and Nate. While Jose never made landfall, we had to plan and prepare for it in case it did. Nate did make landfall,

striking Alabama and Mississippi in the Gulf Coast resulting in Major Disaster Declarations in each state.

At FEMA, we are constantly reviewing our program delivery, decision-making processes, and responses to ensure that we improve, minimize errors, and better serve survivors on their worst day. We also are eager to work with Congress and this Committee in its oversight capacity to determine if legislative changes are required, and to ensure that we are executing our programs consistent with congressional intent. We have learned, and will continue to learn, from this historic disaster season.

Lessons Learned

Federally Supported, State Managed, Locally Executed

Some lessons we learn are not new to us, but an affirmation of lessons learned in the past. For example, the optimal disaster response is federally supported, state managed, and locally executed. This concept is well known throughout the emergency management community, but this season provided a good case study in why this is important.

All disasters are local, and local governments respond to an untold number of disasters every year. When the resources required to respond to a disaster exceed local capacity, the local government will call upon neighboring jurisdictions to bring in the additional resources needed. Local governments can, and periodically do, turn to county or state governments for additional resources.

When a governor or tribal leader turns to the President requesting federal assistance, and the President agrees to activate federal resources to support a disaster-stricken state, tribe, or territory, the governor or tribal leader continues to support the local governments impacted by the disaster. Congress has provided FEMA authorities and resources to support governors and tribal leaders, but not to supplant them or the local leaders.

FEMA's ability to provide support in disasters builds on, and is subject to, the capacity of state, territorial, tribal and local governments. This is not a new lesson or challenge, but one that we are constantly reminded of. If the state, territorial, tribal and local governments are well resourced, well trained, and well organized, the effectiveness of FEMA's assistance is great. If, on the other hand, a state, territorial, tribal or local government is not well resourced, well trained, and well organized – either due to ineffective preparations or due to the significance of the disaster itself – FEMA can help, but the response may not be as quick or as effective as we would like it to be.

Survivable and Redundant Communications

In order for FEMA to support the needs of any governor effectively, the capability gaps at all levels of government must be communicated effectively to FEMA. We saw in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria that their communications infrastructure was so completely devastated that assessing the needs and the capability of the Commonwealth and local governments was extremely difficult.

In Puerto Rico, little of the communications infrastructure survived the hurricane. FEMA quickly worked to ensure that each of the 78 municipalities in Puerto Rico got access to satellite phones so that they could communicate with the Commonwealth that was co-located with FEMA. Communication with satellite phones has limitations, so FEMA began placing personnel in each of the municipalities to further enhance communications between the Commonwealth, local governments, and FEMA.

While these communications challenges were the result of a major hurricane, we need to plan for what survivable communications look like in the context of the potential for a Cascadia or New Madrid earthquake scenario, or other catastrophic events. We, as a Nation, have more work to do in this area.

Disaster Sheltering and Housing

The aftermath of the 2017 hurricane season leaves no doubt that survivor housing is a major challenge. Regardless of the readiness of a state, territorial, tribal or local government, when dealing with the displacement of tens of thousands of survivors from their homes, there is no easy or one-size-fits-all solution.

There are many community-based and national non-profit organizations that do outstanding work in providing temporary sheltering options for survivors, in order to help survivors have a safe place to stay while they catch their breath and consider next steps in the recovery process. Additionally, FEMA has authorities to provide for sheltering options including the Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA) program that pays for survivors to stay in hotel rooms, as well as a program that provides for basic and temporary home repairs to make a home safe and habitable while the survivor makes arrangements for more permanent repairs. Any sheltering option is, by design, a temporary, short-term solution, designed to be a bridge to middle- and longer-term solutions.

We have other programs and authorities that assist with temporary housing: rental assistance, multi-family lease program, mobile housing units, and others. Additionally, we provide survivors assistance with repairing a damaged home including financial assistance for repair, and direct assistance for temporary repairs that help return survivors to their homes.

With all of these options, we partner with our SLTT stakeholder to identify the sheltering and housing solutions that make most sense for each state, each event, each community, and each survivor. The State of Texas, for example, is taking a very hands on approach to managing housing solutions for their residents after Hurricane Harvey. States have a much better familiarity with the needs of their residents, the local laws and ordinances that can impact some of the FEMA housing options, and are much better situated to design and administer to the survivors in their communities. The provision of shelter and temporary housing is a complicated and difficult process that needs more work. Regardless of the tools we are able to provide, however, permanent housing solutions are best addressed by insurance. As we know, though, there are too many people in our nation that are underinsured or not insured at all.

Strategic Priorities

Throughout this challenging hurricane and wildfire season, I have seen many practices, programs, and ideas put to test that no intra-agency brainstorming session could accomplish. These experiences have informed my Strategic Plan moving forward, to: 1) Build a Culture of Preparedness; 2) Ready the Nation for Catastrophic Disasters; and 3) Reduce the Complexity of FEMA.

Build a Culture of Preparedness

FEMA is just one part of the team. During a disaster, citizens in the impacted communities also become the “first responders.” We need to empower individuals with life skills to help speed the response and recovery efforts.

Do they know how to shut off water and gas? Do they check on their neighbors? Do they know CPR? Are they financially prepared to deal with the impacts of disasters in their communities, including having the right insurance for the disasters they face – be they flood, earthquakes, tornadoes, etc.? Do they have some modest level of savings to allow them to miss a few days of work without ending up in financial ruin?

Developing resilient communities ahead of an incident reduces loss of life and economic disruption. When communities are impacted, they should ensure that they rebuild infrastructure better, tougher, and stronger to protect taxpayer investment and promote economic stability. FEMA is exploring ways to encourage additional investments in mitigation that reduce risk, including pre-disaster mitigation, to help reduce disaster costs at all levels.

While we’ll never be able to eliminate risk, we must mitigate risk. FEMA will work with communities and insurers to close the insurance gap across the nation. Managing risk through insurance, including the National Flood Insurance Program, helps communities to recover faster following disasters and reduces costs for taxpayers.

Ready the Nation for Catastrophic Disasters

We can’t just continue to plan, train and exercise for what’s easy. We need to prepare for catastrophic events that stress our logistics, supply chain, continuity of operations, communications and staffing capacities – just to name a few.

Meanwhile, communities must increase their capacity to respond to smaller-scale disasters - locally. We will continue to work with our state, territorial, tribal, and local partners to increase their capacities to respond and recover from smaller-scale disasters so FEMA and its federal partners can focus some more on readiness for catastrophic events. We need to ensure we’re not just ready for catastrophic hurricanes, but also for other natural disasters and hybrid threats.

I am placing members of the FEMA team in state emergency operations centers to jointly plan with states to build this catastrophic capability.

Reduce the Complexity of FEMA

FEMA is committed to simplifying our processes and putting survivors first. We must look at ways we can streamline our assistance programs to make FEMA's programs as clear and easy as possible for survivors and grantees to navigate.

I have charged my staff with reducing administrative and bureaucratic burdens, so that survivors and communities receive assistance more quickly. Throughout the federal government, there are a number of programs that offer assistance to survivors. We are working with our partners to streamline and consolidate some of these activities to ensure survivors can better navigate our various programs.

FEMA employees must have transparency and clarity in the processes and resources they deal with. We can't implement any of these priorities and initiatives without ensuring that they meet the needs of our survivors. We also need to make sure that we continue to capture lessons learned by FEMA and our partners to meet the needs of survivors with disabilities and others with access and functional needs.

These are my priorities, and this is my vision. As we examine and develop these priorities, we will find that some can be accomplished by existing authorities Congress has already provided to us. There will be some challenges, however, that cannot be solved by administrative action alone. As we identify those, we will work closely with this Committee and the rest of Congress to ensure we move forward in close partnership. All of you have constituents that may one day need FEMA assistance. I look forward to working with you on our shared goal to help people before, during, and after disasters.

Next Steps

As we continue with recovery operations resulting from recent disasters, FEMA is also focused on making sure we are as prepared as possible for the upcoming hurricane season. For example, the National Level Exercise (NLE) 2018 will occur in May. This exercise will examine the ability of all levels of government, private industry, non-governmental organizations, communities, and individuals to respond to and recover from a major hurricane with localized catastrophic impacts. A series of seminars, workshops, and tabletop exercises are being developed to address key functional topics. Recent real-world events will help make NLE 2018 a more realistic, relevant exercise, and help ensure we are well prepared for the 2018 hurricane season, and beyond.

NLE 2018 consists of four overarching exercise objectives: pre-landfall protective actions; sustained response in parallel with recovery planning; continuity in a natural disaster; and power outages and critical interdependencies.

As we do before every hurricane season, we are reviewing our hurricane response plans and procedures, updating our high priority national level contracts, and enhancing our disaster response capabilities (for example, FEMA is adding 300 new emergency generators to our inventory).

Also, thanks to action taken by Congress, FEMA now has new authorities given to us in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 to further support the nation's response and recovery efforts prior to the upcoming hurricane season.

For example, in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, FEMA may provide Public Assistance funding for critical services to replace or restore systems to industry standards without restrictions based on their pre-disaster condition. The law further allows FEMA to provide assistance for critical services to replace or restore components of the facility or system that are not damaged by the disaster when it is necessary to fully effectuate the replacement or restoration of disaster-damaged components to restore the function of the facility or system to industry standards.

Recognizing the importance of mitigation, Congress also included a provision that directs FEMA to provide hazard mitigation assistance for recipients of Fire Management Assistance Grants in Fiscal Years 2017 and 2018. The law also codified FEMA's recent policy change to make houses of worship eligible for Public Assistance repair and replacement assistance.

Conclusion

This last year's hurricane and wildfire season was and is historic, and is shaping the future of FEMA and emergency management. My priorities are to build a culture of preparedness, ready the nation for catastrophic events, and reduce the complexity of FEMA. I ask this Committee and Congress for your continued support as we undertake these efforts.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to any questions you may have.