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**House of Representatives**  
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Thank you, Chairman Garbarino, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Committee. As the Representative for Florida's 23<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District — and the only former statewide Emergency Management Director to ever serve in Congress — I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about how we strengthen FEMA and improve the way our country prepares for, responds to, and recovers from disasters.

This hearing is timely because the FEMA Review Council is preparing to finalize recommendations on the agency's future. And unfortunately, recent reporting has raised questions about how that review process has unfolded, including changes to the scope of the draft report and the cancellation of a planned public briefing. At a moment when FEMA's role, structure, and its very existence are under active review, it is especially important that reform discussions remain focused on strengthening the agency rather than dismantling it.

Unfortunately, there has been serious talk in recent months about eliminating FEMA in some form. Secretary Noem herself has publicly argued for eliminating FEMA "as it exists today," before later shifting her position to argue that FEMA should be reworked or reoriented rather than fully dismantled. Regardless of how it is framed, eliminating FEMA is not the right answer. FEMA is not perfect — no agency is — but we don't fix that by walking away. We fix it by making the agency better. We can save FEMA by enacting common sense reforms that make it faster, more efficient, and more effective, and I've been working on bipartisan proposals to do that. We have a real opportunity to make the agency deliver as the American people deserve it to.

The worst thing Congress could do right now is dismantle the only federal agency whose sole mission is to respond when Americans are at their most vulnerable. Eliminating FEMA would force states to take on disasters alone, regardless of whether they have the resources or capacity to do so. It would slow recovery, raise costs, and leave families without the support they need.

The rate of disasters is increasing, and their severity is increasing as well. In 2023 alone, the United States faced 28 separate billion-dollar disasters, the highest number ever recorded, totaling more than \$91.3 billion in damages.<sup>1,2</sup> Events like these aren't concentrated in one region, either — they strike nearly every part of the country, and the damage is such that communities simply can't recover alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Wu, Shuang-Ye. "Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters Broke U.S. Record in 2023, NOAA Says." PBS NewsHour, January 10, 2024. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/a-record-28-billion-dollar-weather-and-climate-disasters-struck-the-u-s-in-2023-noaa>

<sup>2</sup> National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI). *U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather & Climate Disasters 1980–2024*. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/billions/events.pdf>.

We saw it in Hawaii, when wildfires tore through Maui, decimating the historic town of Lahaina in what became the deadliest U.S. wildfires in more than 100 years. Nearly 100 people were killed, and thousands of families lost their homes and businesses at incredible emotional and financial cost — more than \$5.7 billion in damage.<sup>2,3</sup>

We saw it in my home state of Florida, when Hurricane Ian made landfall as a Category 4 storm, flattening coastal communities, cutting power to millions, and causing nearly \$120 billion in damage.<sup>1</sup> It was one of the costliest storms on record.

And of course, during COVID-19, our country experienced our first-ever nationwide Major Disaster Declaration. All 50 states, all five territories, and the District of Columbia were under active declarations at the same time.<sup>4</sup> It was the first time a public health emergency triggered a response under the Stafford Act.<sup>5</sup>

These are just a few of the many examples, but in all of them, who showed up to help? It was FEMA — working alongside state and local responders — that helped provide shelter, coordinate aid, and begin the long but necessary recovery process.

In the years after Ian, FEMA provided \$1.15 billion in direct grants to help nearly 400,000 Florida households repair and rebuild, and another \$2.3 billion to local communities for debris cleanup and infrastructure repair.<sup>6</sup> In total, federal support for Ian's recovery topped \$10.2 billion.<sup>6</sup> In Hawaii, FEMA is still around almost two years later, offering direct housing assistance. And during COVID, the agency helped deliver billions of units of PPE, supported field hospitals and vaccine sites, and provided more than \$125 billion in emergency aid to state and local governments.<sup>4,5</sup> If there was ever any doubt about FEMA's importance, COVID made it clear.<sup>4,5</sup> FEMA delivered the national response that the pandemic required.

All of this to say, this is not a regional issue. It is national. As more and more Americans live in high-risk areas and the climate continues to change, the scale and costs of these disasters will keep rising. And FEMA is the only federal agency with the expertise and infrastructure to coordinate response and recovery at this magnitude.

But FEMA can only do that work if it has the structure, authority, and agility to meet the challenges we face. That's why I introduced the FEMA Independence Act — to restore FEMA as

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<sup>3</sup> Blake, Mike, and Marco Garcia. "Maui Wildfires Deadliest in Century as Death Toll Hits 93." *Reuters*, August 13, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/death-toll-maui-fires-hits-least-80-damages-billions-dollars-2023-08-12/>.

<sup>4</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). *FEMA Led Historic Pandemic Response, Supported Record Number of Disasters in 2020*. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, January 11, 2021. <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20210111/fema-led-historic-pandemic-response-supported-record-number-disasters-2020>.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office. *Disaster Relief Fund: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 Could Improve FEMA's Estimates*. GAO-24-106676. Washington, D.C.: Government Accountability Office, July 9, 2024. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-106676>.

<sup>6</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency. "Hurricane Ian: Two Years into Recovery." *FEMA.gov*, September 19, 2024. <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20250122/hurricane-ian-two-years-recovery>.

a stand-alone agency with a direct line to the President. I'm honored that this Committee included that reform in the broader package. It's a commonsense step that reflects what many of us already knew from experience: FEMA needs the ability to act quickly, cut through bureaucracy, and lead when disaster strikes.

While that is an important step in the right direction, I also believe we should continue exploring ways to give states more flexibility in how they administer disaster recovery programs. For example, I introduced the Disaster Housing Flexibility Act and the Disaster Response Flexibility Act to allow states to opt into a block grant model for housing and public assistance. These proposals are rooted in my experience managing state block grant programs during my time as the Director of Florida's Division of Emergency Management, where getting resources out the door quickly made a real difference.

These kinds of reforms are not about shifting responsibility. They are about recognizing that some states have the capacity and readiness to move faster — and we should empower them to do so when appropriate. A voluntary block grant framework would allow FEMA to focus more of its capacity on states that need the most federal support, while giving states with strong emergency management infrastructure more say in their own recovery. Not only would it reduce administrative burden and increase efficiency, it would also give states the flexibility to tailor assistance in ways that make the best use of available resources. It is a flexible, scalable model worth considering as we look ahead.

FEMA is not a luxury. It is a lifeline. Whether it is hurricanes in Florida or Texas, wildfires in Hawaii or California, floods in Vermont or Iowa, tornadoes in Kentucky or Mississippi, or heat waves in Nevada or Arizona, FEMA shows up with the people and resources to help. That work does not replace state or local efforts — it supports and strengthens them when the scale exceeds what any one community can manage.

That is why proposals to abolish FEMA are so dangerous. Eliminating the only federal agency solely focused on disaster response would not make our communities safer or recovery faster. It would do the opposite. We should be improving FEMA, not tearing it down — and that is exactly what this reform package begins to do.

This Committee plays a central role in shaping FEMA's future through oversight of the DHS and the agency's disaster mission. The discussions taking place here, alongside the ongoing work of the FEMA Review Council, will help determine whether FEMA is positioned to respond effectively to the growing scale and complexity of disasters. I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to that conversation and look forward to working with the Committee as it considers reforms to strengthen FEMA and the federal state partnership.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.