



**FEMA**

STATEMENT

OF

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**“Emergency Preparedness: Are We Ready For A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Hugo?”**

Submitted

By

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## **Introduction**

Chairman Duncan, Ranking Member Barber, and other distinguished members of this Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). I am Robert J. Fenton, and I currently serve as the acting Deputy Associate Administrator for FEMA's Office of Response and Recovery.

Over the years, FEMA Headquarters and its regional offices have worked closely with state, local, tribal and territorial governments across the country, and with faith-based organizations, to develop catastrophic, worst-case scenario plans that are flexible and scalable for incidents of all magnitudes. FEMA's ongoing partnerships with states allow coordination and collaboration with the "Whole Community" to plan and prepare for a range of disaster events.

As this subcommittee is aware, this year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Hurricane Hugo. Its impact on the state of South Carolina and surrounding states was a harbinger for even more destructive and costlier hurricanes to hit our shores — including Hurricanes Andrew, Katrina, Rita, Wilma, and Sandy. When Hurricane Hugo hit the Southeastern region of the United States, FEMA was a relatively young agency — ten years in existence — with limited experience, exposure, and practice with catastrophic disasters.

Today, FEMA is a very different organization than it was twenty-five years ago. With more statutory authorities, a better skilled, experienced and agile workforce, a keen focus on a whole community approach to emergency management, and the advent of social media and other technologies, FEMA is transforming the way in which our nation prepares for, responds to, and recovers from all hazards.

## **Hurricane Hugo**

Hurricane Hugo made landfall just north of Charleston, South Carolina, at midnight September 21, 1989, as a Category 4 hurricane with 135 mph winds, and rolled through South Carolina on a northwest path. The storm's strong winds extended far inland and storm surge inundated the South Carolina coast from Charleston to Myrtle Beach. Hours later, the storm tore through much of North Carolina. It was the strongest hurricane on record to hit South Carolina, and the second

strongest hurricane — since reliable records began in 1851 — to hit the Eastern seaboard north of Florida.

More deadly and destructive than Hurricane Hugo's 135 mph winds were the surging tides accompanying landfall. The combination of high tide, the tidal surge preceding Hugo and waves generated by the storm inundated a wide area of coastal plain. In Charlotte, North Carolina, hundreds of miles inland, residents lost power for up to 18 days as thousands of trees, broken limbs and debris severed power lines. In South Carolina alone, FEMA provided \$70 million to individuals and families for housing and other disaster-related expenses and \$236 million for debris removal, public utility and infrastructure repair or replacement and emergency protective measures. According to the National Weather Service, Hurricane Hugo was the costliest hurricane on record to hit the United States at the time.

### **How FEMA is Transforming in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

#### **I. Whole Community Approach to Emergency Management**

Hurricane Hugo, like many other disasters, draws our communities even closer together and catalyzes the actions of not only our federal, state and local governments, but also the private sector, ordinary citizens, and many other sectors of society. Thus, preparedness is a shared responsibility, and it calls for the involvement of everyone in preparedness efforts.

The three core principles of whole community — understanding and meeting the actual needs of the whole community, engaging and empowering all parts of the community, and strengthening what works well in communities on a daily basis — provide a foundation for pursuing a whole community approach to emergency management through which security and resiliency can be attained.

In 2007, FEMA created a Private Sector Division in the Office of External Affairs and put private sector liaisons in each of the FEMA ten regions. Private sector specialists at headquarters, the regions and joint field offices serve as a gateway to private sector engagement and integration.

Furthermore, the division also runs the National Business Emergency Operations Center (NBEOC), to facilitate public-private information sharing and situational awareness with

operational partners during major disasters. The NBEOC is a virtual organization and currently has 377 members from both the private and public sectors.

Building on our whole community efforts, in 2012, FEMA created a “seat at the table” for the private sector through our Private Sector Representative Program. To date, we have had representation from nine companies, one academic institution and one non-governmental organization (NGO). FEMA regions have begun implementing the program as well – including Region IV which supports the Southeastern region, including the state of South Carolina.

In July 2013, FEMA launched a new program known as Tech Corps. The Tech Corps Program is the product of Senator Ron Wyden’s vision for a way to integrate trained, corporate technology volunteers into disaster response at the state, local, tribal and territorial levels – whom they support directly.

In short, by engaging and working with the whole community, everyone can make the nation safer and more resilient when struck by hazards, such as natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and pandemics. Collectively, our nation can achieve better outcomes in times of crisis, while enhancing the resilience of our communities.

## **II. Building on National Preparedness Efforts**

FEMA’s planning efforts are centered on our preparedness policy and doctrine, which leads to coordinated catastrophic planning that relies on a shared understanding of threats, hazards, capabilities, processes, and ultimately, the value of being prepared.

This Administration remains steadfast in its commitment to strengthening the security and resilience of the United States; and, we continue to become more secure and better prepared to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from the full range of threats and hazards the nation faces. We plan, organize, equip, train, and exercise better, resulting in improved national preparedness and resilience.

Much of this progress has come from leadership at the state, local, tribal and territorial levels, fueled by FEMA’s grant programs. Over the past ten years, DHS has provided state, local, tribal, and territorial governments with billions of dollars in grant funding. As a nation, we have built and enhanced capabilities by acquiring needed equipment, funding training opportunities, developing

preparedness and response plans, and continuing to conduct exercises that help build relationships across city, county, and state lines. For instance, in the last four years alone, FEMA has awarded approximately \$313 million for hurricane/high wind mitigation projects. These project types include safe rooms for first responders and critical staff, and structural retrofits that provide high wind protection for vulnerable buildings and critical infrastructure.

In addition, FEMA has provided funding for emergency power generation at critical facilities; weather warning system enhancements; training and other support for building code officials; and community education efforts.

Although FEMA's grant funds represent just a fraction of what has been spent on homeland security across the Nation, these funds and the development of capabilities they have made possible, have helped change the culture of preparedness in the United States.

*Presidential Policy Directive 8 (PPD-8)*

In March 2011, President Obama signed PPD-8, which describes the nation's approach to national preparedness. PPD-8 aims to strengthen the security and resilience of the United States through the systematic preparation for the threats that pose the greatest risk to the security of the Nation, including acts of terrorism, cyber incidents, pandemics, and catastrophic natural disasters. PPD-8 defines five mission areas – prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery – as part of a continuum of interrelated activities and requires the development of a series of policy and planning documents to explain and guide the nation's efforts in helping to ensure and enhance national preparedness.

PPD-8 created the National Preparedness System (NPS), a cohesive approach that allows us to use the tools at our disposal in the most effective manner and to monitor and report on progress being made in national preparedness. Moreover, the NPS was designed to help guide the domestic efforts of all levels of government, the private and nonprofit sectors, and the public to build and sustain the capabilities outlined in the national preparedness goal. And finally, NPS helps to articulate how well prepared we are by setting a goal, establishing baseline capabilities, setting common and comparable terminology, measuring capability gaps, and assessing our progress toward filling them.

### **III. Catastrophic Planning and Preparedness**

Understanding the critical importance of catastrophic preparedness, FEMA is also leading substantial response planning, including the development of plans across the federal government for catastrophic incidents; future operations for potential/actual incidents; regional planning for all-hazards events; and evacuation and transportation planning. There are also special programs focused on planning for chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosives (CBRNE) hazards to communities throughout the Nation.

In addition to these planning efforts, FEMA coordinates closely with our federal partners in many ways on other efforts in preparing for disasters, including the development of pre-scripted mission assignments, interagency agreements, and advanced contracts for commodities. These partnerships are essential to FEMA's ability to carry out its mission by leveraging the full capacity of the federal government.

### **IV. Critical FEMA Authorities Post Hurricane Hugo**

#### *Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act (PKEMRA) of 2006*

In addition to building on our whole community efforts over the years and creating more robust and better informed catastrophic plans, Congress has also played an instrumental role in transforming FEMA into a more effective and efficient agency. The importance of PKEMRA to the emergency management community is significant. PKEMRA provided FEMA clearer guidance on its responsibilities and priorities, and the authorities and tools we needed to become a more effective and efficient agency, and a better partner to state, local, territorial, and tribal governments.

PKEMRA also continues to give us the authority needed to lean forward and leverage the entire community in response and recovery efforts. This whole community approach emphasizes the importance of working with all partners to successfully prevent, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards.

*Sandy Recovery Improvement Act of 2013 (SRIA)*

In January 2013, Congress passed and President Obama signed SRIA into law, authorizing several significant changes to the way FEMA delivers disaster assistance. SRIA is one of the most significant pieces of legislation impacting disaster response and recovery since PKEMRA and builds upon the Robert T. Stafford Emergency Relief and Disaster Assistance Act.

SRIA, and the additional authorities it provides, is aiding recovery efforts associated with recent disasters such as Hurricane Sandy and the floods that impacted the state of Colorado. SRIA's various provisions are intended to improve the efficacy and availability of FEMA disaster assistance and make the most cost-effective use of taxpayer dollars.

One clear example of SRIA's effectiveness in use of taxpayer dollars is the *Public Assistance Permanent Work Alternative Procedure* provision which provides substantially greater flexibility in use of federal funds for Public Assistance applicants and far less administrative burden and costs for all parties – if applicants accept grants based on fixed, capped estimates. To date, FEMA has agreed to fund billions in public assistance permanent work alternative procedure projects in states such as New York and Louisiana.

Another SRIA provision, *National Strategy to Reduce Costs on Future Disasters*, called on FEMA to submit recommendations for the development of a national strategy for reducing costs, loss of life, and injuries associated with extreme disaster events in vulnerable areas of the United States.

As such, on September 6, 2013, FEMA submitted this National Strategy report to Congress recommending ways in which multiple areas could be further explored during the development of a national strategy within the following themes: (1) Engage in a Whole Community Dialogue and Build upon Public-Private Partnerships, (2) Enhance Data-Driven Decisions; (3) Align Incentives Promoting Disaster Cost Reduction and Resilience (4) Enable Resilient Recovery and (5) Support Disaster Risk Reduction Nationally.

All told, these recommendations offered examples of areas that would need much greater discussion and research to develop into a strategic and actionable path forward. The implementation of cost reduction and cost avoidance strategies will require commitment and investment by the whole community to achieve the potential long-term savings and impact.

## **V. The Power and Promise of Social Media and other technologies in Emergency Management for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The advent of social media and other technologies has helped to transform FEMA into an agency that is more in tune with the needs of our citizens, especially during times of crisis. FEMA's approach to emergency management recognizes that individuals, families and communities are our greatest assets and the keys to our success. In order to fulfill our mission, we must work together as one team — this notion is, again, at the heart of our whole community approach to emergency management.

Social media is imperative to emergency management because the public uses these communication tools regularly. Rather than trying to convince the public to adjust to the way we at FEMA have traditionally communicated, we have adapted to the way the public communicates, leveraging the tools they use on a daily basis. Millions of Americans use social media every day to check in on friends and family, learn about current events, and share their experiences. FEMA uses social media to be part of this ongoing dialogue and meet people where they are, using tools and platforms with which they are already familiar.

FEMA also uses social media and other digital methods to communicate because as we have seen, information can lead to action. Our goal is for our safety-related information to have a real-world impact — to inspire actions that lead to more resilient families and communities. If someone sees a preparedness or safety tip from FEMA, the goal is that it will inspire them to prepare themselves as well as empower them to tell a friend how to be more prepared or where to find help.

Lastly, social media and emerging technologies allow us to reach more people more quickly during disasters, when they need accurate, timely and authoritative information that helps ensure the protection of their life or livelihood. With one click of the mouse, or one swipe of the smartphone screen, FEMA and its whole community partners can share a message to thousands of people and have a tangible impact. These capabilities did not exist twenty-five years ago when Hurricane Hugo hit the Southeastern coast of the United States.



## **Conclusion**

Finally, although FEMA has made important strides and progress over the years since Hurricane Hugo, we still have much work to do.

I am confident that with the additional authorities Congress has provided, an emphasis on a whole community approach to emergency management, a growing and more skilled work force, social media, and lessons learned from disasters over the years, FEMA will continue to be an agile and innovative agency for many years to come.

Again, thank you Chairman Duncan for providing me this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss emergency preparedness for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I look forward to answering questions you or other members of this Subcommittee may have.