



Statement of

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on behalf of the National Association of Counties

before the

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Subcommittee on Oversight and Management Efficiency

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for the hearing

“Oversight of Federal Efforts to Address Electromagnetic Risks”

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Thank you Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Watson Coleman and Members of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Management Efficiency for this opportunity to testify.

My name is Judson Freed and I have served as Director of Emergency Management and Homeland Security in Ramsey County, Minnesota since 2003. I am also vice chair of the Emergency Management Subcommittee of the National Association of Counties' Justice and Public Safety Policy Steering Committee.

About NACo

NACo is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States, including Alaska's boroughs and Louisiana's parishes. Founded in 1935, NACo assists America's 3,069 counties in pursuing excellence in public service to produce healthy, vibrant, safe and resilient communities.

About America's Counties

Counties are highly diverse, not only in my state of Minnesota, but across the nation, and vary immensely in natural resources, social and political systems, cultural, economic and structural circumstances, and public health and environmental responsibilities. If you've seen one county, you've seen one county, and there are 3,068 more to go.

Counties also often serve as our nation's first line of defense before and after disasters strike. While state statutes and organizational structures vary, local emergency management responsibilities are most commonly vested in county governments. Many counties, including Ramsey County, are required to maintain an emergency management agency to coordinate all activities related to emergency and disaster situations. These responsibilities go well beyond the functions of public safety and emergency services and involve a community wide effort before, during and after a disaster or emergency incident occurs. Emergency managers are charged with preparing their communities for disasters so that when these events inevitably take place, their toll on our residents, homes and public and private structures is minimized. Following a disaster, local emergency managers, on behalf of their elected officials, work to mitigate damage and save lives. In the aftermath of disasters, we coordinate and help fund clean-up, recovery and rebuilding so that our residents can return to their lives as quickly as possible.

About Ramsey County, Minnesota

Ramsey County is a large, fully urban county located near Minnesota's border with Wisconsin, and with a population of more than 550,000, is the second-most populous county in Minnesota. It is also the smallest county in Minnesota, and with its large population, among the most densely populated counties in the nation. St. Paul, the capital of Minnesota, is our county seat.

As a large, urban county located in the northern Midwest, Ramsey County faces perennial threats ranging from tornadoes and ice storms to train derailments and multi-location terrorist attacks. In my role as the County's Director of Emergency Management and Homeland Security, I work to protect our local communities and their residents and structures from the ongoing threats posed by these disasters.

Federal Efforts to Address Electromagnetic Risks: the Local Perspective

Counties are not merely stakeholders in this conversation, but a pivotal part of the federal-state-local partnership of governments that together share the responsibility of protecting our nation and its residents from disasters. Any potential failing of our nation's power grid – and the cascading impacts that would follow – would require an immediate on-the-ground response by county emergency

managers, law enforcement, firefighters, EMS, 911 call centers, public health officials and public records and code inspectors. As such, counties appreciate the potential threat posed by electromagnetic risks and commend the Subcommittee for convening this hearing to assess federal efforts to address these risks.

Mr. Chairman, I will focus my remarks today on three principles that we believe the Subcommittee should observe as you assess federal efforts to mitigate against electromagnetic risks:

- **First, the potential impact of federal policy changes on local governments should be closely considered, particularly when it comes to emergency management.** Counties are charged with protecting local communities from threats both natural and man-made, and federal actions that change national priorities can unintentionally compromise counties' ability to carry out this responsibility and ultimately make our nation less safe.
- **Second, electromagnetic risks should be viewed in the context of the wide variety of threats faced by our nation and its local communities.** We must prepare for an arguably unprecedented variety of risks – from hurricanes and tornadoes to terrorism and cybersecurity threats – and should not lose sight of this fact as we assess electromagnetic threats.
- **Third, emergency management resources – both fiscal and administrative – are finite at all levels of government and should be allocated based on holistic and pragmatic risk-assessment.** Diverting limited resources from highly-probable threats will make our nation less prepared for the risks and disasters that have proven to be perennial visitors to our communities.

By observing these principles – which are elaborated upon below – as you assess federal efforts to mitigate against electromagnetic risks, the Subcommittee can lessen the likelihood that policy changes made leave our country more prepared for one particular threat while decreasing our overall preparedness for the many different risks that face our local communities at any given time.

The potential impact of federal policy changes on local governments should be closely considered, particularly when it comes to emergency management. As outlined in the opening section, counties play a critical role in protecting our local communities from natural and man-made threats. It has been said that “disasters are local,” and I can attest that a well-organized local emergency management structure is crucial to disaster preparation, mitigation and recovery efforts.

But many factors affect a local emergency manager's ability to perform his or her functions in a streamlined and efficient manner. De-prioritization of emergency management efforts at the county level or insufficient support for emergency management from the state government are just two examples. Another example – most relevant to the conversation at hand – involves rapidly changing priorities and policies at the federal level. Counties respond to the federal government's actions, not just in our role as intergovernmental partners working with our federal counterparts towards the shared goal of serving American residents, but also because our constituents demand that their local leaders keep pace with the federal government's priorities and initiatives.

Policy changes related to electromagnetic risks would be no different in this regard. Consider the Critical Infrastructure Protection Act (H.R. 1073), which was passed by the House late last year. The bill would require, in part, that the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security “conduct outreach to educate... emergency response providers at all levels of government of the threat of [electromagnetic

pulse] events.” Imposing federal requirements like this has the potential to disrupt the ongoing process of local emergency management planning and coordination and could undermine our ability to preserve the safety of our communities. We urge Members to consider the cumulative impact of such requirements as Congress works to enact this legislation.

Electromagnetic risks should be viewed in the context of the wide variety of threats faced by our nation and its local communities. Due to changes in weather patterns and population growth – especially in densely populated areas like Ramsey County – our nation is facing an arguably unprecedented number of threats and disasters. We must not lose sight of these various threats as we take on the work of assessing the risks posed by electromagnetic pulses and space weather events.

According to NACo’s analysis of data made available by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), 92 percent of counties across the nation have had at least one presidential disaster declaration in the past ten years. Overall, these disaster declarations are happening at unprecedented rates, and each disaster seems costlier than the last. Due to globalization and advances in technology that have made us more interconnected than ever before, communities across the country also face novel cybersecurity threats from within and outside the U.S.

While we appreciate the importance of protecting our nation against a potentially devastating failure of our power grids resulting from an electromagnetic event, we urge you to consider this threat in the context of all of the risks and threats that we have been entrusted to protect our communities against, especially at a time when the full range of threats seems to be increasing year after year.

Emergency management resources – both fiscal and administrative – are finite at all levels of government and should be allocated based on holistic and pragmatic risk-assessment. As disasters increase in both frequency and cost, we must be pragmatic in resource allocation, so that our limited emergency management resources go as far as possible in preserving lives, homes and public and private structures in our local communities. Rather than creating new priorities or costly mandates, we urge you to view electromagnetic risks as one element in the portfolio of major risks we face.

In Ramsey County, we have worked hard to ensure that our emergency management decisions and policies are based on pragmatic risk assessment that takes into consideration both the likelihood and potential consequences of various threats. This method of emergency management is one that was promoted in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s 2014 *Quadrennial Homeland Security Review*, and is widely accepted as a local best practice in counties throughout the country. Through this sort of risk assessment, we aim to make resource allocation decisions that will best protect our communities from threats and disasters. While low priority events like electromagnetic pulses may be deprioritized in this way – and while we appreciate that these events are not unprecedented – we nonetheless believe that given our finite resources, we can best protect our residents, homes and public and private structures through this manner of risk assessment.

That said, we are by no means inattentive to the threats posed to our power grids. We monitor space weather reports and provide weekly reports to our public safety partners and leadership; we monitor the status of our region’s power grid and include our utility providers in our oversight and planning workgroups. We assess transmission line protection in light of severe weather and flooding – as well as geomagnetic incidents. Whether through space weather, terrorist threat, or an ice storm or hurricane, large-scale power failures would present significant and cascading challenges to our emergency response systems, and we consider these risks in our disaster response and coordination efforts, and

based on our broader risk-assessment strategies, work to mitigate these risks at every opportunity.

Closing

Thank you again Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Watson Coleman and Members of the Subcommittee for this opportunity to provide the local perspective in this important conversation on federal efforts to address electromagnetic risks.