



Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

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July 13, 2018

SUMMARY OF SUBJECT MATTER

TO: Members, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management
FROM: Staff, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management
RE: Subcommittee Hearing on “Are We Ready? Recovering from 2017 Disasters and Preparing for the 2018 Hurricane Season”

PURPOSE

On Wednesday, July 18, 2018, at 10:00 a.m. in 2167 Rayburn House Office Building, Members of the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management will meet for a hearing titled “Are We Ready? Recovering from 2017 Disasters and Preparing for the 2018 Hurricane Season.” The purpose of this hearing is to understand the status of the recovery from the 2017 disaster season, including hurricanes and wildfires, and efforts to prepare for the 2018 Hurricane Season which began on June 1.

Witnesses include the Associate Administrator of Response and Recovery from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), representatives of state and local emergency managers, and the private sector.

BACKGROUND

Overview of the 2017 Hurricane and Wildfire Seasons

The 2017 hurricane season produced several devastating storms and hurricanes. Ten hurricanes were recorded in the Atlantic alone, including six major hurricanes (Category 3, 4 or 5), which devastated parts of Texas, Florida, and the Caribbean.¹ The season also brought over

¹ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “Extremely active 2017 Atlantic hurricane season finally ends.” November 30, 2017.

\$368.66 billion in damages, due mostly to the season's three most destructive hurricanes.² In the Texas area, Hurricane Harvey dropped over 51 inches of rain, resulting in at least 83 deaths, displacement of over 30,000 people and over 17,000 rescues.³ Hurricane Harvey was one of the most costly hurricanes in U.S. history, with damage estimates reaching \$200 billion.⁴ Following Hurricane Harvey in Texas, Hurricane Irma hit Florida and parts of the Caribbean, causing 47 total direct deaths.⁵ In addition to the loss of these lives, about \$50 billion in damages were recorded in the United States.⁶ Hurricane Maria, another major hurricane, hit Puerto Rico and other parts of the Caribbean shortly after Hurricane Irma. Hurricane Maria caused numerous deaths with the actual death toll in Puerto Rico highly uncertain,⁷ and about \$90 billion in damages in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.⁸

Hurricane Harvey broke record rainfall statistics with 51.88 inches in parts of Texas.⁹ Hurricane Maria also broke a record by becoming the most intense cyclone to strike U.S. territories.¹⁰ Hurricane Irma was able to sustain 185 mph winds for 37 hours, which is another record for the highest mph winds for the longest time period.¹¹ All the damages from these hurricanes and other smaller ones made the 2017 hurricane season the costliest season ever recorded and one of the most active.

In addition to having one of the most destructive and active hurricane seasons ever recorded, 2017 also included one of the worst wildfire seasons in United States history. Nationwide, over 66,000 wildfires burned over 9.7 million acres of land.¹² In California, over 7,000 wildfires burned through over a half million acres of land.¹³ Strong Santa Ana winds, dry brush and dead trees, fueled the start of most of the fires. The 2017 wildfires set ablaze a significant portion of the state of California – spreading as far north as the Oregon border and as far south as San Diego, California. The wildfires spread across the Western United States, hitting 10 states in total including parts of Arizona, Oregon, Montana, Nevada, and Washington.¹⁴

² National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration “Hurricane Season - 2017.” Available at: <https://sos.noaa.gov/datasets/hurricane-season-2017/>.

³ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “Hurricane Harvey: Clouds with Precipitation – 2017.” Available at: <https://sos.noaa.gov/datasets/hurricane-harvey-clouds-with-precipitation-2017/>.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Statistics provided by NHC, available at https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL112017_Irma.pdf

⁶ Id.

⁷ Statistics provided by NHC, available at https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL152017_Maria.pdf.

stating “. . . that hundreds of additional indirect deaths in Puerto Rico may eventually be attributed to Maria's aftermath pending the results of an official government review.”

⁸ Id.

⁹ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration “Hurricane Season - 2017.” Available at: <https://sos.noaa.gov/datasets/hurricane-season-2017/>.

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Id.

¹² <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/fire/201713>.

¹³ Statistics provided by CalFire, available at http://cdfdata.fire.ca.gov/incidents/incidents_statevents.

¹⁴ “Statistics” from the National Interagency Fire Center, available at https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/fireInfo_statistics.html (Accessed March 14, 2018).

These hurricanes and wildfires were among the 59 major disasters declared under the *Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act* (Stafford Act, P.L. 100-707), (42 U.S.C. 5121 et seq.) in 2017.¹⁵ In addition to these disasters, flooding was also a problem in 2017. California had its wettest winter on record, which included the Oroville Dam crisis.¹⁶ Fourteen places across Oklahoma, Missouri, and Arkansas reported record-high water levels during floods in April.¹⁷ Requests for federal disaster aid jumped tenfold compared to 2016, with 4.7 million people registering with FEMA.¹⁸

Outstanding Issues from 2017

Nearly a year later since these record breaking disasters, the United States continues to grapple with issues of recovery and the rebuilding of its infrastructure: including housing, emergency work, reimbursements, community disaster loans and administrative costs. Processes can be slow, cumbersome and confusing for individuals and communities trying to recover from disasters, and numerous federal agencies are involved.

Federal Assistance for Disasters

FEMA is the federal government’s lead agency in preparing for, mitigating against, responding to, and recovering from disasters and emergencies related to all hazards – whether natural or man-made. FEMA’s primary authority in carrying out these functions stems from the Stafford Act. The Stafford Act authorizes three types of declarations: (1) major disaster declarations; (2) emergency declarations; and (3) fire management grant (FMAG) declarations.

Presidentially Declared Major Disaster

When state and local resources are overwhelmed and the “disaster is of such severity and magnitude that effective response is beyond the capabilities of the state and the affected local governments,”¹⁹ the Governor of the affected state may request the President to declare a major disaster. FEMA’s primary Stafford Act programs for disaster response and recovery in the aftermath of a major disaster are in the Public Assistance Program and the Individual Assistance Program. As part of each major disaster, FEMA also provides Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) funds.

¹⁵ Federal Emergency Management Agency, “FEMA Reflects on Historic Year,” December 29, 2017. Available at <https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2017/12/29/fema-reflects-historic-year>

¹⁶ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “Very wet 2017 water year ends in California.” Available at: <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/featured-images/very-wet-2017-water-year-ends-california>.

¹⁷ National Weather Service, “Historic Flooding Event—28-30 April 2017.” Available at: <https://www.weather.gov/sgf/28-30AprilHistoricFloodingEvent>.

¹⁸ Achenbach, Joel, “Federal aid claims jump tenfold in 2017, after series of record-breaking natural disasters.” Washington Post. November 18, 2017. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/federal-aid-claims-jump-tenfold-in-2017-after-series-of-record-breaking-natural-disasters/2017/11/18/662887ce-bd8d-11e7-8444-a0d4f04b89eb_story.html?utm_term=.f02c0e6838bd

The Public Assistance Program, authorized primarily by Sections 403, 406, and 407 of the Stafford Act, reimburses state, tribal, and local emergency response costs and provides grants to state and local governments, as well as certain private non-profits to rebuild facilities. The Public Assistance Program generally does not provide direct services to citizens.

The Individual Assistance Program, authorized primarily by Section 408 of the Stafford Act and also known as the Individuals and Households Program, provides assistance to families and individuals impacted by disasters, including housing assistance. Housing assistance includes money for repair, rental assistance, or “direct assistance,” such as the provision of temporary housing.

Section 404 of the Stafford Act authorizes HMGP, which provides grants to state and local governments to rebuild after a disaster in ways that: (1) are cost effective; and (2) reduce the risk of future damage, hardship, and loss from natural hazards. The central purpose of this grant program is to enact practical mitigation measures that effectively reduce the risk of loss of life and property from future disasters. FEMA provides grants to states under HMGP so that they may assist families in reducing the risk to their homes from natural disasters. In the case of wildfires, mitigation measures covered by HMGP include, but are not limited to: establishing defensible space measures around buildings; using fire-resistant building materials; and regularly clearing combustibles that could serve as fuel for a wildfire. FEMA provides up to 75 percent of the funds for mitigation projects under HMGP and the remaining 25 percent can come from a variety of sources (i.e., a cash payment from the state or local government).¹⁹

Fire Management Assistance Grant Program

Section 420 of the Stafford Act authorizes FEMA to provide fire management assistance to state, local, and tribal governments for the mitigation, management, and control of any fires burning on publicly or privately owned forests or grasslands that threatens such destruction as would constitute a major disaster. FMAG funding may be used for equipment and supplies, labor costs, emergency work, pre-positioning of resources, and temporary repair of damage caused by work directly related to firefighting activities associated with the declared fire.²⁰

Committee Leadership on Disaster Policy Reform

The Disaster Recovery Reform Act (DRRA)

On November 30, 2017, the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure unanimously approved DRRA. The House added the DRRA policy proposals to the third

¹⁹ “Hazard Mitigation Grant Program,” Federal Emergency Management Agency,” *Fema.gov*. (Accessed March 14, 2018).

²⁰ “Fire Management Assistance Grant Program,” Federal Emergency Management Agency *Fema.gov*. (Accessed March 14, 2018).

disaster supplemental appropriations bill, H.R. 4667, which was passed by the House on December 12, 2017, but these policy provisions were not included in the final bill that was signed into law. DRRA was also added to H.R. 4, the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018, which passed the House on April 27, 2018. On June 13, 2018, the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee introduced and reported their own version of DRRA.

DRRA places greater emphasis on pre-disaster mitigation, and incentivizes states to invest in stronger mitigation measures and resilient rebuilding to ensure that our communities are well-equipped to better prepare for and withstand disasters of all kinds. For every one dollar spent on mitigation activities, six dollars is saved²¹. DRRA deals directly with wildfire prevention by permanently amending the Stafford Act to allow HMGP funds to be generated from fire management assistance grants.

CONCLUSION

Last year was a year of unprecedented disasters that affected more than 25 million Americans (almost eight percent of the U.S. population).²² These disasters demonstrate the importance of mitigating risks and preparing for the next disaster. These efforts have shown to reduce disaster costs and losses and increase resilience so that individuals and communities can get back to normal as quickly as possible after being impacted by a disaster.

²¹ “National Institute of Building Sciences Issues New Report on the Value of Mitigation,” National Institute of Building Sciences. Available at: <https://www.nibs.org/news/news.asp?id=381874>

²² Federal Emergency Management Agency, “FEMA REFLECTS ON HISTORIC YEAR.” Available at: <https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2017/12/29/fema-reflects-historic-year>.

WITNESS LIST

Mr. Jeffrey Byard
Associate Administrator
Office of Response and Recovery
Federal Emergency Management Agency

Mr. Charles “Ray” Alexander
Director of Contingency Operations and Chief of the Office of Homeland Security
United States Army Corps Of Engineers

Mr. Patrick Sheehan
Director
Tennessee Emergency Management Agency
On behalf of the National Emergency Management Association

Ms. Mistie Gardner, CEM
Emergency Management Coordinator
City of Richardson, Texas
On behalf of the U.S. Council of the International Association of Emergency Managers

The Honorable R. David Paulison
Former Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
On behalf of the BuildStrong Coalition