

STATEMENT

OF

WILLIAM B. LONG

ADMINISTRATOR

FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

BEFORE

THE

HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

WASHINGTON, D.C.

“The Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Supplemental Disaster Recovery
Appropriations Request”

Submitted

By

Federal Emergency Management Agency

500 C Street SW

Washington, D.C. 20472

November 30, 2017

Introduction:

Good morning, Chairman Carter, Ranking Member Roybal-Allard, and Members of the Committee. My name is Brock Long, and I am the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). I would like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss FEMA's supplemental appropriations request before Congress and this hurricane season's federal response and recovery efforts.

I have been in office for just over five months, and I am proud to be part of an agency that, works every day to help communities reduce the risks associated with future disasters, as well as to assist disaster survivors all across the country. In this short time, our Nation has faced four catastrophic disasters. Hurricane Harvey struck Texas with both strong wind and record setting rainfall. Then, Hurricane Irma swept through the Caribbean, striking the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Georgia, and the entire state of Florida. Hurricane Maria followed, striking a devastating blow to the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. Weeks later, nearly two dozen large wildfires burned more than 200,000 acres of state and private land in northern California.

These historic disasters – each historic in its own right – have compelled FEMA to push its limits. These events have also required action by Congress, actions that entrust FEMA to coordinate effective and efficient response and recovery missions, to provide oversight of the taxpayers' investment in these activities, and to maintain a highly regarded and well trained cadre of employees. Today, I would like to share with you not only the experiences of recent months, but also the financial and legislative priorities that will drive a successful recovery.

2017 Hurricane Season

FEMA works quietly, day in and day out, across the country responding to many disasters that do not get national attention. Prior to Hurricane Harvey making landfall on August 25, 2017, FEMA had 17 Joint Field Offices working 28 Presidentially-declared disasters. FEMA, our partner agencies in the federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, in addition to vital volunteer relief organizations and the private sector, work in concert, with unity of effort, to serve the needs of disaster survivors.

To say this hurricane season has been historic is an understatement. We had four hurricanes make landfall this season, three of which have been major hurricanes (Harvey, Irma, and Maria).

Since Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Texas, the President has made 16 Major Disaster declarations and 14 Emergency Declarations, while FEMA has authorized 25 Fire Management Assistance Grant declarations. Hurricane Irma was unique not only because it struck both the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, but also because it struck the entire State of Florida, including the Seminole Tribe of Florida. Hurricane Maria, following in quick succession, then struck the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, more than 1,000 nautical miles from the mainland United States, devastating an area with already fragile infrastructure and facing challenging economic circumstances. In a span of 25 days, FEMA and our partners deployed tens of thousands of personnel across 270,000 square miles in three different FEMA Regions.

The impacts of these events are substantial. Roughly 25.8 million people were affected by these three storms – eight percent of the entire U.S. population. As of November 13, 2017, more than four and a half million survivors have registered for FEMA assistance, more than those who registered after Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Wilma and Sandy combined. FEMA’s Individual and Households Program (IHP) has thus far approved more than \$2 billion in disaster assistance to respond to the three hurricanes, and I expect this number to continue to grow. As of mid-November, National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) policyholders filed approximately 120,000 claims, and the NFIP has paid over \$4 billion to them.

In just over 30 days, FEMA increased our call center capacity to more than ten times our steady-state level. Call centers receive registrations for FEMA’s Individual Assistance program from survivors, and they also serve as a helpline for those survivors who have questions about their applications. Additionally, FEMA more than quadrupled our cadre of inspectors, who validate damages to an applicant’s home and property. We will continue to expand these capacities each day for as long as the mission requires.

FEMA alone cannot deliver assistance to this vast number of survivors. Unity of effort is required for disaster response and recovery on any scale, but especially in response to this historic season. When emergency managers call for unity of effort, we mean that all levels of government, non-profit organizations, private sector businesses, and survivors must work together, each drawing upon their unique skills and capabilities, to meet the needs of disaster survivors.

State, local, tribal, and territorial governments, along with the residents in the affected areas, are the true first responders. Non-profit organizations, like those that are members of the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (NVOADs), provide crucial services to sustain lives while the rest of the response and recovery infrastructure can be established by emergency managers for longer-term needs. The private sector also plays a critical role in disasters, as businesses work to restore critical services and donate their time and resources in close coordination with emergency management personnel to help communities rebound in the wake of disasters. The whole community must be, and is, engaged, involved, and coordinated.

For our part on the federal level, FEMA called upon not only the vast majority of our own workforce, but also engaged over 3,800 other federal employees to participate in the “Surge Capacity Force”, both by tapping into the Department of Homeland Security’s existing program and expanding participation in that program to all Federal agencies. This is significant. FEMA employees come to FEMA knowing they will be deployed into disaster areas, work in austere conditions, and assist survivors. That is part of our job at FEMA. However, when personnel from outside FEMA volunteer for the Surge Capacity Force, they volunteer to leave their jobs and families, receive just-in-time training, and work in an environment that is completely unfamiliar and outside of their normal job responsibilities.

I am incredibly grateful to my interagency colleagues from across the Federal government for supporting this important initiative, and for allowing their hardworking and dedicated personnel to support disaster survivors who have been impacted by these historic events. Over 22,300

members of the Federal workforce were deployed to Texas, Florida, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. This includes 13,892 staff from various offices of the Department of Defense, including the military services. We could not do this without them.

This unprecedented hurricane season has truly tested us as a Nation and tested many of our assumptions about what works in disaster response and recovery. While each year the hurricane season comes to an end on November 30, the lessons from the response and recovery operations that we are performing this year, under incredibly difficult circumstances, will transform the field of emergency management forever.

The Disaster Relief Fund

Under current law, the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) is the source of the funding that enables FEMA to direct, coordinate, manage, and fund response, recovery, and mitigation efforts associated with major disasters and emergencies that receive a Presidential declaration pursuant to the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act). Therefore, FEMA's ability to provide essential services and financial assistance to overwhelmed state, local, tribal, and territorial governments depends on having sufficient balances in the DRF.

The DRF helped fund response needs related to hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria and will also help fund recovery efforts for those events. As of November 13, 2017, FEMA obligated approximately \$13.7 billion to support response to and recovery from these hurricanes.. Adequate funding for the DRF is essential to FEMA's ability to carry out its mission.

Because FEMA had only \$2 billion on hand to fund major disaster operations at the time Harvey struck, the Agency took extraordinary measures to maintain the DRF's solvency during the first two weeks of the incident response, including temporarily suspending payments for long-term recovery projects (a policy known as Immediate Needs Funding), and reprogramming a net total of \$750 million from the base category of the DRF (which funds, among other things, emergency declarations) to the Majors Disaster category.

To date, Congress has passed two supplemental appropriations bills that enable FEMA to continue helping communities respond to and recover from Harvey, Irma, and Maria. I am concerned, however, that use of emergency appropriations like those passed on September 8 and October 24 may become the new normal due to a decline in the amount of funding available for natural disasters since Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 that is projected to continue.

Currently, Congress proactively funds the DRF through annual appropriations in anticipation of future disaster activity. This mechanism, known as the Disaster Relief Allowable Adjustment, or more simply the Disaster Cap, was successful in decreasing dependence on supplemental appropriations since it was put into place with the passage of the Budget Control Act of 2011 (BCA).

Funding available under the Disaster Cap is recalculated each year based on a formula established by the BCA that in part utilizes a ten year average. It is important to note that the Nation went 11 years without a major hurricane making landfall, which has affected the funding available to the DRF. However, the Disaster Cap will continue to fall or remain flat over the

next few years due to the good fortune of relatively low disaster spending between 2012 and 2016, and the fact that the Disaster Cap does not take into account emergency funding FEMA will receive in FY 2018.

This drop in the Disaster Cap could result in constraints on future DRF appropriations and, consequently, insufficient balances in the DRF to support mission operations. This dynamic could lead to an increasing reliance on emergency supplemental appropriations to support basic disaster missions as soon as this fiscal year or FY 2019. We would like to work together with Congress to provide a fix to the mechanism that funds the DRF.

Third Request for Supplemental Appropriations Related the 2017 Hurricane Season

On November 17, 2017, the President transmitted a \$43.996 billion emergency supplemental appropriations request to provide the resources necessary for the recovery efforts related to Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria. This constitutes the third request from the Administration as a result of the devastating Atlantic hurricane season. This fall, Congress has already provided \$35.8 billion in funding and cancelled \$16 billion in NFIP debt to meet urgent emergency response needs in affected areas and longer-term recovery requirements. It sends a very clear message: We are committed to the long-term recovery of all impacted individuals as well as conducting this recovery in a fiscally responsible and prudent manner.

While this is an FY 2018 supplemental request, it does not represent either a schedule or a deadline for recovery efforts. Providing the necessary funding and authorities requested by the Administration will address ongoing recovery efforts in Texas and Florida, as well as the medium-term response and recovery missions in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

In terms of meeting FEMA's mission, the Administration's package includes \$23.5 billion for the Disaster Relief Fund. This funding is critical to finance ongoing recovery and stabilization operations, support survivors, and support estimates for permanent public infrastructure work associated with recovery from Hurricanes Harvey and Irma as well as initial permanent public infrastructure work estimates for Hurricane Maria. This supplemental request would also allow a portion of the Disaster Relief Funds be made available for Community Disaster loans to support the operating liquidity needs of affected areas.

We ask the Congress to act quickly upon this request.

Next Steps and Conclusion

At FEMA, we seek constant improvement to better support America's disaster survivors, citizens, first responders, and communities. Responding to and recovering from any disaster is a whole community effort that relies on the strength of federal, state, local, and tribal governments as well as non-governmental entities and individuals, in addition to FEMA. The unprecedented events of this past fall are no exception.

The response to the 2017 hurricane season continues to provide me the opportunity to test the validity of many of the ideas I had coming into this job. We look forward to collaborating with Congress in the coming months to implement lessons learned, as well as gather any additional

feedback that you may have. I look forward to your questions. Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today.