Opening Statement of Chair Kathy Castor
Hearing on "Creating a Climate Resilient America: Reducing Risks and Costs"
Select Committee on the Climate Crisis
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As prepared for delivery

Last week we heard from Members directly about the impacts of the climate crisis on the communities they represent all across America. Today we'll examine the federal government's role in helping communities reduce the risks and costs of climate-fueled disasters.

States, cities and tribes across the country are taking bold action to adapt to the changing climate. They need a strong federal partner. Whether it's through scientific information on what the future holds, climate risk data, resilience standards or technical assistance tools, the federal government has an opportunity to help communities grow stronger in the face of the climate crisis – with a particular eye to communities that are on the front lines.

Every community is different. Which is why the best role for the federal government is to empower local communities, to give them the right tools and data to build strong and rebuild smart.

The federal government also can lead by example, by requiring that federally-funded projects avoid areas that are prone to the worsening effects of the climate crisis.

One thing we can't do is move backwards. In 2017, President Trump decided to roll back a federal flood standard meant to protect communities from damage. Ten days later, the necessity of those protections was made evident when Hurricane Harvey struck the Texas Gulf Coast, causing massive loss of life and property.

Across the nation, more than 20 states and hundreds of communities have adopted higher standards to reduce flood losses, through establishing higher elevation requirements or limiting development in flood-prone areas. Now the federal government must modernize the national federal flood standards to ensure the resilience of federally-supported development, redevelopment, and rebuilding.

To help local decision-makers better protect their citizens, we must also make sure they know how climate change is increasing risks in their communities. Whether it's flooding, wildfires or extreme heat, they need to know what to anticipate, as well as the best ways to prepare their residents for a changing climate.

We must also establish clear, uniform national standards that are grounded in robust climate science. With better guidance, local officials can make better decisions about where to build homes, schools and hospitals.

Maps that integrate climate risk will help us make better decisions today, so our buildings can meet the demands of the future. As more and more climate risk data becomes available, the federal government will need to develop new maps that take into account the increasing effects of the climate crisis, including future sea-level rise and stronger storms.

We also need to better understand how the risk of wildfires threatens communities, forests, and federal assets. Experts across the country are working on building and landscape designs to help families and communities respond to the growing risk of wildfires. But that research doesn't always prompt better choices, at least at the scale needed to reduce wildfire losses.

We can change that. We can enhance our current maps, codes and standards in order to protect Americans against floods and wildfires. We can equip local governments with the tools they need to build resilient infrastructure. And we can make sure the federal government leads by example.

We need to act quickly. Natural disasters in the United States have become more frequent, more severe, and more costly over the past two decades. In fact, since 2000, flood-related disasters in the United States caused more than $845 billion in losses, making it the costliest disaster threat in the nation. During the last three hurricane and wildfire seasons, our country experienced $330 billion dollars in damages from six hurricanes, as well as over $40 billion from eight wildfires.

Here's the good news: through serious climate action, we can reduce these costs across the nation. Resilient communities attract investments, reduce dependence on federal disaster aid, and protect their public credit ratings, which can reduce the cost of capital. Resilient communities can make sure land-use decisions avoid flood and wildfire-prone areas. They can adopt and enforce good codes and standards. They can make sure residents are well-prepared for storms and wildfire seasons. They just need our help to get there.

The solutions we discuss today will uplift communities, protect valuable natural resources, and reduce the costs of the climate crisis. I look forward to hearing from our great panel of experts.