

Testimony of James Lee Witt before the Congress of the United States, House of Representatives, Committee on Oversight and Reform, Subcommittee on Environment

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Chairman, Rouda, Ranking Member Comer and Members of the Committee,

It is my privilege to appear before the Committee today to talk about issues that are very important to our citizens and our communities. These issues involve how we work together to mitigate, prepare, respond and recover from disasters. I have dedicated my professional and personal career working with communities on these issues. I had the privilege to serve as Director of FEMA, from 1993-2001, under President Clinton, who recognized that, in the aftermath of a disaster, it was important that our citizens could count on the government, to be there and help them when they needed it most.

I came to FEMA during a time when this philosophy was not often followed and I was tasked to rebuild an Agency that several members of Congress called for abolishing after mismanagement and poor response performance in disasters including Hurricanes Andrew and Iniki.

With the strong support of the Congress and the Administration, we proceeded to reform and rebuild FEMA. We were immediately tested with the devastating Midwest Floods of 1993. This flooding impacted 9 States. We streamlined our operations and responded well but more importantly, we wanted to engage individuals in a program that would prevent the economic and social dislocation, caused by the flooding, from ever happening again. With the support of Congress, we engaged local citizens in a voluntary program to buy out their homes in the floodplain. In Missouri alone, we bought out over 4,000 homes. The value of this program was quickly realized when in 1995, a repeat of the 1993 flood occurred and the social and economic costs were substantially reduced. Throughout my time at FEMA, mitigation became a high priority. The idea was to prevent people and communities from becoming victims of disasters.

We initiated a Program in 1997 called Project Impact: Building Disaster Resistant Communities. This program provided seed money to communities if they would take 4 simple steps: Form a committee of all community wide partners; identify their hazards; prioritize a plan to address each hazard; and communicate their actions to reduce the hazards. We started with 7 communities and by 2000 we had over 250 communities joining the program, many which did not receive seed money but wanted to be designated. One of the key supporters of this program was the private sector and their financial support of mitigation projects was a major success.

After the Nisqually earthquake, which impacted Seattle, the Mayor was on National news saying their damages were minimal because they were part of Project Impact. Unfortunately, the program was discontinued in 2001.

Since leaving FEMA, I have worked with diverse communities, jurisdictions and other countries to promote emergency management, mitigation and improve long term-recovery from disasters. It has been a troubling and hectic time. I have worked to improve building codes at the International Code Council, recovery from Katrina and numerous other domestic disasters, including the California wildfires, Houston, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

I have several specific examples of actions that could have been taken in the California wildfires and also examples of problems in Puerto Rico that I will be happy to address with the Committee.

But it is vry clear to me that we must take action to reform our current Federal system of disaster management, risk reduction, and recovery. The system is broken.

There are three elements that I would like Congress to consider:

1. Requesting FEMA reinstate the streamlined initial recovery process and funding mechanisms are established that don't depend on Supplementals.
2. Funding mitigation/risk reduction at a level commensurate with the risk both before disasters and after.
3. Establishing FEMA as an independent Agency and not part of the Department of Homeland Security.

It is very evident that the intensity and frequency of disasters has increased. We are experiencing natural disasters 5 times as often as they occurred in the 1970's and their intensity and scope has increased. In 2018, we had 13 billion dollar disasters. In the first months of 2109, we had major disaster declarations in 32 states for floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, severe weather storms, landslides, mudslides and wildfires. At this rate we will may exceed previous years requests. There's no indication this will not continue.

At this rate, the funding to the Disaster Relief Fund will not meet the demand.

Some of these disasters may require less Federal funding but may still get tied up in the budget problem. One idea to consider is for OMB to finance a separate fund to handle small disasters.

Another idea is to request FEMA to fund up to 50% of the debris removal costs immediately which is a big step toward recovery.

Also, when I was at FEMA we instituted a streamlined recovery process to certain disasters. Reengineering that process in light of the increase in disasters could potentially help certain communities.

I was a proponent of mitigation when I had to deal with flooding when I was a County Judge in Arkansas and it worked. When I was Director of FEMA, we had success in convincing Congress to invest in pre-disaster mitigation and to increase the amount of funding available in post disaster mitigation. And FEMA still gets some funding for these efforts. However, when we are looking to the future of multiple billion dollar disasters every year, wouldn't it make sense to

provide more money up front to help citizens and communities from experiencing the floods or hurricanes or wildfires, especially since we have proven actions that could be taken before these events that would substantially reduce the risk. For example, we convinced OMB to fund a program in California on dead fuel removal that helped minimize wildfires in some areas.

I believe it's time to reconstitute Project Impact either with a government lead or within the private sector. There is interest in the private sector and among the non-governmental groups. It would be attractive to design a tax benefit for participation or perhaps make it part of the new Opportunity Zone effort.

My last recommendation to Congress relative to FEMA is very important to the future of emergency management and disaster reduction.

FEMA needs to become an independent Agency again and be moved out of the Department of Homeland Security. There are numerous reasons for this. The first one being, during and after a disaster, decisions must be made quickly and States and locals need to know what they can or cannot expect to happen and when. That no longer exists as the levels of approval have multiplied and in many disasters, including Katrina, Sandy and Harvey, second guessing on the decisions and actions caused delays and conflicts. Recovery programs have stalled or taken months to be approved. This was certainly true after Katrina as DHS leadership did not recognize the urgency of certain requests and people suffered because of it.

Knowing the Federal system, such a move would be difficult but all you have to do is look at the record of how FEMA functioned as an Independent Agency, especially after President Clinton gave the FEMA Administrator cabinet status. How it has functioned since would lead one to see that to be effective it needs a direct line to the President and not second guessing by people who don't understand the urgency and requirements of disasters. Nor be a vehicle for its minimal discretionary funding be moved around to support other DHS efforts that were higher priority.

In conclusion, the frequency and severity of disasters are going to continue to increase. So far in 2019, there have been major disaster declarations in 35 states. It's time to take action to address this now and to protect the future for our children and grandchildren. I'm prepared to work with Congress to take such actions.

Thank you again for asking me to testify. I will be happy to answer any questions you might have.