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WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

On behalf of the
State of Alabama

Submitted to the House Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Emergency Management and Technology

"Future of FEMA: Perspectives from the Emergency Management Community"

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you, Chairman Strong, Ranking Member Kennedy, and other distinguished members of the Committee for the invitation to testify here today.

I am Jeff Smitherman, Director of Alabama Emergency Management Agency (AEMA) and Cabinet Member to Governor Kay Ivey. Today I want to share with you all what I believe about Emergency Management. At Alabama EMA we are proud to be one of the premiere emergency management programs in the country. Alabama's success is directly tied to the professionalism, training, and experience of our first responders and local emergency management programs. Alabama EMA is responsible for the preservation of the lives and property of the citizens of Alabama through coordination of emergency preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. As Director and Cabinet Member, and on behalf of my colleagues in State and Local emergency management, we thank you for this opportunity to provide a state perspective on the Future of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

DISASTER HISTORY

Alabama is no stranger to large scale disasters. While as a state we are 24th in population we rank 7th in major disaster declarations. During President Trump's first term we had six (6) major disaster declarations and during my tenure at the agency from 2015 to present we have had seventeen (17) major disaster declarations; however, states experience many other events that do not rise to a major disaster declaration but required a significant commitment of state resources. For example, in fiscal year 2023 Alabama supported fourteen (14) such events. In another role, I supported the agency for Hurricane Katrina, Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, the 2011 Tornado Outbreak, and many, many other disasters. These disasters have allowed us to understand the challenges that every community and citizen faces when they experience a disaster.

Over the years, we have tracked federal dollars for each disaster and program. The agency has done this work with no significant audit findings of fraud, waste, or abuse.

STATE INVESTMENT IN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AND BUILDING RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTION IN COMMUNITIES (BRIC) FUNDING

I believe disaster preparedness, response, and recovery for all incidents start and end at the local level and that the relationship is critical between federal, state, tribal and local emergency management. Each jurisdiction maintains separate authorities and capabilities but must work together by connecting and supporting one another to effectively and timely save lives and protect property.

States are critical to successful preparation, response, and recovery within our communities. To fully understand the critical function of the state, I believe a State Emergency Management Director must be included in the review process and on the President's FEMA Review Council.

I believe we must use this reset opportunity to not necessarily to look at how to adjust the current system, but we must look at it more wholistically. What do we want the emergency management

system to look like after the President’s Review Council completes their work? This is a generational opportunity for a rebuilt network with a refined focus and efficiency.

I believe we can gain some efficiencies through this process. With NO ADDITIONAL FEDERAL FUNDS, I believe we can build more state and local capacity by adjusting the funding and redefining and streamlining priorities. I believe Preparedness and Resilience are related functions. The more deliberate focus and effort that goes into preparedness is realized after an event with a more resilient population and infrastructure.

As such, I believe we can place increased priority on State and Local capacity using existing Building Resilient Infrastructure in Communities (BRIC) funding. BRIC is a newer grant program that has not realized its initial goals. By redesigning a small portion of this funding to be made available to all states in order to develop their capacity and the capacity of the local jurisdictions it would be a highly efficient and effective way to serve our citizens who need timely and helpful assistance on their worst days, not months or years of red tape.

The Homeland Security grants serve to train and certify existing local first responders, the same resources that Alabama deployed to North Carolina for Hurricane Helene.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT ASSISTANCE COMPACT (EMAC)

One important system that already exists for states is the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC). I believe EMAC is a viable proven framework and program to execute state-to-state mutual aid. Increased capacity can be used by states within the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) system to cover requirements that FEMA formerly tried to cover. Some examples are states supporting each other with Emergency Operations Center (EOC) augmentations, National Guard assets, swift water rescue teams, or urban search and rescue.

I believe Emergency Management is a team sport, sometimes you rely on one aspect more than the other (State vs FEMA) like run vs pass in football, but everyone still has a role. I think the key during this critical review will be an important opportunity to clearly define the role of local, state, federal, tribal, non-profit, and private sector partners and create a new dynamic emergency management that works for everyone.

STATE SUPPORT WITH PROGRAMS

I believe there is a consensus on the lack of speed, consistency, and clarity from FEMA and I know many in FEMA agree and welcome some level of change.

I believe in an organization dialed in on its mission, the “WHY” it exists. The “why” should drive every action. As soon as it loses its focus on “why” it begins to have issues with the “how”. We have witnessed some of these issues of the “how”. The core mission needs to go back to the basics such as “blocking” and “tackling” in football. EM must stay focused always on the “why” and should ask how this rule, regulation, policy, task, or process impacts the Disaster Survivor or Impacted Community.

The states already build schools, parks, government buildings etc., and I believe we can rebuild better, quicker, and more efficiently in a system more like a block grant than the cumbersome system we currently use that significantly hindered another state agency as evidenced by the below example from Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR).

FEMA has won. I am finished with this project submittal.

As you may recall, on November 18, 2021, we were contacted by EMA that y'all had set aside \$1 million for the generator project at The Lodge at Gulf State Park. I was, and am, very appreciative of your work on this. However, after 3 years and responses to numerous RFIs and constantly moving goal posts by FEMA, I feel we have wasted enough time and money on this project.

We were asked to provide a load analysis of the critical functions of the Lodge. As you and FEMA can see by the detailed (and expensive) analysis that was done, the panels are not separated by just lights, or just AC or just outlets. Most panels are wired by zone or location that contain all these type electrical outputs. You can't just power some items and not others in a panel. That is not reasonable. Two panels that are powered by the existing generator were excluded. We provided more load detail than was asked for to be sure FEMA had all the information.

To be clear, I think this is a worthy project and would serve Coastal Alabama well in a large storm event with very long power outages. The Lodge was built to withstand damage from hurricanes and can be used as a staging area for first responders, a lodging facility for insurance adjustors, FEMA and EMA representatives and other personnel that are critical after an event. To serve this function, nearly all of the facility would need to be powered. However, this has gone on so long with FEMA that the allotted \$1 million will not be sufficient to complete this project. The cost of generators, switches, and construction have gone up substantially since we proposed this project. I am not prepared to pay the cost difference between the 2021 prices we estimated and the current costs. Also, the lead time on large generators is now 18-24 months. That is two more hurricane seasons without this capability. The multi-year delay on this project by FEMA has doomed it to failure. I will never again apply for BRIC or Hazzard Mitigation funds from FEMA. The juice is not worth the squeeze.

*Chris Blankenship
Commissioner
Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources*

The Public Assistance (PA) program is most suited for a block grant system. PA provides eligible applicants funding to remove debris, restore bridges, culverts, school buildings, government buildings etc. after a disaster. These costs are estimated quickly but the federal process to review gets so complicated and works against the best interests of the community with delays that often last for years. The Hazard Mitigation Grant Program is even worse with

unnecessary complexity and layers of bureaucracy that delays projects like community safe rooms for years at a time.

The Individual Assistance (IA) program provides direct financial assistance to disaster survivors and would be more difficult to decentralize and is probably still best run by FEMA but also needs an aggressive review to improve efficiency. Including likely a totally new software that supports rather than hinders the program.

CONCLUSION

As I conclude, I want to again thank the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you today. Emergency Management is critical, and the time is now to implement improvements that will change the way we do business and ultimately better serve the citizens of the United States.