

STATEMENT

OF

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“Are We Ready? Recovering from the 2017 Disasters and Preparing for the 2018 Hurricane
Season”

Submitted

By

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Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Barletta, Ranking Member Titus, and Members of the subcommittee. My name is Jeff Byard, and I am the Associate Administrator for the Office of Response and Recovery for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). On behalf of U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Nielsen and FEMA Administrator Long, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss the lessons learned from the 2017 historic hurricane season and the ongoing progress made under FEMA's strategic plan, including our preparations for the 2018 hurricane season.

I am proud to continue to be part of an agency that, every day, helps communities before, during and after disasters. Last year's historic hurricane season was a true test of the Nation's ability to respond to and recover from multiple concurrent disasters.

More than ten months later, FEMA remains steadfast in its commitment to support the needs of survivors of these disasters. We continue to work tirelessly to support state, local, tribal and territorial (SLTT) partners to respond to and recover from disasters, and to mitigate against future disasters. We overcame many challenges and we have gained invaluable knowledge which we have incorporated into our strategy going forward, but we are not finished. We will continue to adapt and expand our understanding of emergency management to ensure that we can best support our partners' ability to build more resilient communities, lessen the impacts of disasters, and ultimately help individuals get back on their feet quickly.

2017 Hurricane Season: Key Themes & Lessons Learned

Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria caused a combined \$265 billion in damage and were each, individually, among the top five costliest hurricanes on record. In response, FEMA coordinated large deployments of federal personnel, both before and after the hurricanes' landfalls, to support response and initial recovery efforts across 270,000 square miles. These deployments included more than 17,000 FEMA and federal Surge Capacity Force personnel, and nearly 14,000 personnel from various offices of the Department of Defense. FEMA facilitated logistics missions that moved more than \$2 billion worth of commodities across several states and territories, using multiple modes of transportation. FEMA Urban Search and Rescue Task Forces, comprised of state and local emergency responders, saved or assisted nearly 9,500 lives across the three hurricanes. In total, the hurricanes and California wildfires affected more than 47 million people—nearly 15 percent of the nation's population. FEMA registered nearly 4.8 million households for assistance.

The unprecedented scale, scope, and impacts of the complex combination of disasters, tested the improved capabilities that were developed and as a result of lessons learned from Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy.

Following the 2017 hurricanes, FEMA thoroughly reviewed preparations for the immediate response, and initial recovery operations with the goal of identifying lessons learned which collectively benefit future operations undertaken by FEMA, the emergency management community, and the nation. Key themes which emerged include:

- **Sustained Whole Community Logistics Operations:** The scale and duration of life-saving and sustainment operations showed that FEMA must be ready to support logistics missions that span weeks or months, particularly in remote locations where commodities and equipment are transported by non-traditional methods. Plans and procedures for resource movement and transportation logistics, including the last mile of delivery, must be effectively coordinated with other government agencies, non-profit organizations, and the private sector supply chain.
- **Federally Supported, State Managed, Locally Executed:** FEMA’s ability to provide support in disasters builds on, and is subject to, the capacity of SLTT governments. If these governments are well resourced, well trained, and well organized, the effectiveness of FEMA’s assistance is enhanced. If the SLTT government’s ability to respond—for example, the ability to provide law enforcement, medical support, or commodity distribution—is diminished, then FEMA and its partners must find ways to deliver and support these critical services. FEMA is not traditionally a first responder but had to play a more direct response role following Hurricane Maria.
- **Staffing for Concurrent, Complex Incidents:** When Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Texas, FEMA had staff deployed to 32 presidentially declared disasters across 19 field offices. By the time Maria made landfall, following Harvey and Irma, decisions regarding personnel made in support of one incident had impact to ongoing disaster operations. FEMA and our federal government partners rapidly surged and deployed personnel to support immediate response operations. FEMA also relied on mission assignments and the Surge Capacity Force to supplement our existing disaster workforce, pulling resources and personnel from across federal government departments and agencies.
- **Survivable and Redundant Communications:** Following Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico’s communications infrastructure was so completely devastated that assessing the needs and the capability of the Commonwealth and its municipalities proved extremely difficult. FEMA provided satellite phones to each of the 78 municipalities in Puerto Rico to gather information on municipality impacts and critical needs. However, this short term solution had limited success in addressing overall communications challenges. The private sector played a key role in restoring communications, including cell towers and allowing open roaming services, and remains a critical partner for restoration of communications.
- **Responding during Long-Term Infrastructure Outages:** Too often, we assume the loss of power, communications, and water infrastructure following disasters will be limited in duration. The extreme degradation of critical infrastructure in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands created significant challenges. We need to be prepared for long-term outages of these critical systems, while our SLTT and private sector partners work to mitigate future damages to these vital systems.
- **Land Use Planning:** In Texas, we saw the importance of land use planning and local building codes. New development should be built away from high-hazard areas and

existing structures should be relocated to safer areas when possible to minimize impacts from hazards. It's both how we build and where we build that affect local and regional risk. Land use regulations are a vital resilience tool for local governments and FEMA encourages regional coordination to help make decisions that best reduce risk. Codes and standards are also only as good as the mechanisms in place to enforce them.

- **Disaster Sheltering and Housing:** Providing housing for survivors following the 2017 hurricanes was a challenge, especially when a disaster devastates a community that already had limited affordable housing. Regardless of the readiness of an SLTT government, when dealing with the displacement of tens of thousands of survivors from their homes, there is no easy or one-size-fits-all solution. FEMA has authorities to provide sheltering options including the Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA) program that provides assistance to SLTT governments for survivors to stay in hotel rooms, as well as a program that provides for basic and temporary home repairs to make a home safe and habitable while the survivor makes arrangements for more permanent repairs.

Any sheltering option is, by design, a temporary, short-term solution, designed to be a bridge to middle- and longer-term solutions. We have other programs and authorities that assist with housing, including rental assistance, repair assistance, multi-family lease and repair program, and manufactured housing units. With all of these options, we partner with our SLTT stakeholders to identify the sheltering and housing solutions that make the most sense for each state, each event, each community, and each survivor.

The State of Texas, for example, is taking a very hands-on approach to managing housing solutions for their residents after Hurricane Harvey. States have a much better familiarity with the needs of their residents, the local laws and ordinances that can impact some of the FEMA housing options, and are better situated to design and administer to the survivors in their communities. Regardless of the tools we are able to provide, however, permanent housing solutions and full recovery needs are best addressed by insurance. FEMA assistance programs are not designed to return a survivor's home to its pre-disaster condition. As we know, though, there are too many people in our nation that are underinsured or not insured at all.

FEMA's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan

Incorporating the knowledge gained from last hurricane season, FEMA's new strategic plan builds on existing best practices and identifies new initiatives geared toward achieving three overarching goals. The three main goals of the FEMA's Strategic Plan are to: 1) Build a Culture of Preparedness; 2) Ready the Nation for Catastrophic Disasters; and 3) Reduce the Complexity of FEMA.

Build a Culture of Preparedness

FEMA is just one part of the team. During a disaster, citizens in the impacted communities also become the first responders. Do they know how to shut off water and gas? Do they check on their neighbors? Do they know CPR? Are they financially prepared to deal with the impacts of disasters in their communities, including having the right insurance for the specific threats they

face, including flooding, earthquakes, and tornadoes? Do they have some modest level of savings to allow them to miss a few days of work without ending up in financial ruin? We need to empower individuals with life skills to help speed the response and recovery efforts.

Developing resilient communities before an incident occurs reduces loss of life and economic disruption. When communities are impacted, they should ensure that they rebuild infrastructure better, tougher, and stronger to protect taxpayer investment and promote economic stability. FEMA is exploring ways to encourage additional investments in mitigation that reduce risk, including pre-disaster mitigation, to help reduce disaster costs at all levels.

While we will never be able to eliminate all risk, we must mitigate the known risks as much as possible. FEMA will work with communities and insurers to close the insurance gap across the nation. Managing risk through insurance, including the National Flood Insurance Program, helps communities to recover faster following disasters and reduces overall costs for taxpayers.

Ready the Nation for Catastrophic Disasters

As this past year has shown, communities must increase their capacity to respond to smaller-scale disasters on a local level. We continue to work with our SLTT partners to increase their capacities to respond to and recover from smaller-scale disasters so FEMA and its federal partners can focus more on readiness and support for catastrophic events.

No level of government can continue to plan, train and exercise for what is easy. We need to prepare for catastrophic events that stress our capabilities. Last year, Administrator Long announced his intent to embed FEMA staff within SLTT partner offices to help provide a continuous and more coordinated FEMA presence to improve customer service and provide targeted technical assistance to help build capacity and address capability gaps. The first FEMA Integration Team was placed in North Carolina this year and the scalable, flexible concept will continue to roll out to other states to help meet their resiliency goals.

As part of FEMA's initiative to ready the nation for catastrophic events, FEMA is emphasizing the stabilization of critical lifelines and coordination across critical infrastructure sectors. Lifelines provide indispensable services that enable the continuous operation of critical business and government functions, and that would risk health and safety or national economic security if not promptly restored. Solutions to stabilize lifelines do not fit within a single construct (i.e. an Emergency Support Function [ESF] or Recovery Support Function), so we must provide cross-sector coordination to effectively stabilize critical lifelines. For example, the critical lifeline of food, water, and sheltering crosses many agencies, community partners, and ESFs, but must be addressed holistically in order to support a community's recovery. Focusing on these lifelines and related impacts will allow decision-makers to move rapidly and will allow better utilization of limited resources to target towards the restoration of critical functions.

Reduce the Complexity of FEMA

FEMA is committed to simplifying our processes and putting survivors first. We are looking at ways we can streamline our assistance programs to make FEMA's programs as clear and easy as possible for survivors and grantees to navigate.

Reducing administrative and bureaucratic burdens will allow survivors and communities to receive federal assistance quicker. Throughout the federal government, there are a number of programs that offer assistance to survivors. We are working with our partners to improve some of these activities to ensure survivors can better navigate these various programs. For example, FEMA is consolidating and updating all FEMA Individual Assistance (IA) policies and program guidance to simplify and streamline information about IA programs.

FEMA employees must have transparency and clarity in the processes and resources they deal with. We cannot implement any of these priorities and initiatives without ensuring that they meet the needs of our survivors. We also need to make sure that we continue to capture lessons learned by FEMA and our partners to meet the needs of survivors with disabilities and others with access and functional needs.

These are the priorities and vision of this Agency. As we examine and further develop these initiatives, we will find that some can be accomplished by existing authorities Congress has already provided to us. There will be some challenges that cannot be solved by administrative action alone. As we identify these challenges, we will work with this subcommittee and the rest of Congress to ensure we move forward in close partnership. I look forward to working with you on our shared goal to help people before, during, and after disasters.

Preparing for the 2018 Hurricane Season & Ongoing Initiatives

As we continue with recovery operations, FEMA is also focused on making sure we are as prepared as possible for the upcoming hurricane season. Combining the lessons learned from 2017, as well as the goals outlined in FEMA's Strategic Plan, the Agency has already taken immediate actions to prepare for the 2018 hurricane season. These steps include:

- ***Updating Plans*** - FEMA has updated hurricane plans, annexes, and procedures for the states and territories.
- ***Staff Movement Prior to & During Responses*** – To improve staffing for incidents, FEMA created Standard Operating Procedures for a Personnel Mobilization Center (PMC), a central location for equipping and training staff prior to disaster deployments. To support the PMC, FEMA is also establishing three permanent PMC core teams in its Field Operations Directorate, and training regional personnel on PMC operations.
- ***Logistical Improvements*** - FEMA made improvements in logistics operations in preparation for the 2018 hurricane season, including increasing planning factors and disaster supplies for the Caribbean such as meals, water, tarps, sheeting, cots, blankets, infant and toddler kits, durable medical kits, consumable medical kits, and generators. FEMA is also adding 300 new emergency generators to the inventory.
- ***National Level Contracts*** - FEMA updated high priority national level contracts, including the National Evacuation Contract, Caribbean Transportation Contract, and National Ambulance Contract.

- ***Disaster Communications*** - FEMA disaster communications is refining tactical and long haul communications, from land mobile radios to satellite communications.
- ***Housing Inspection Process*** - FEMA will modernize housing inspections to improve the survivor experience and streamline the process to lessen the inspection burden for the disaster survivor and better leverage similar efforts across the federal government.
- ***Exercises and Training*** - In May, FEMA sponsored National Level Exercise (NLE) 2018, based on a scenario of a Category 4 hurricane on the mid-Atlantic coast. This exercise brought together more than 12,000 individuals across the whole community to examine the ability of all levels of government, private industry, and non-governmental organizations while testing and validating plans and initial lessons learned from last year. FEMA also coordinated with the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico on a series of workshops, seminars, and functional exercises in June to prepare for this hurricane season.

Conclusion

The 2017 hurricane and wildfire season was and is historic, and continues to shape the future of FEMA and emergency management. By utilizing best practices, adopting new response concepts, and planning and training all emergency management partners to the same standards, we can achieve the goals of building a culture of preparedness and readying the nation for catastrophic disasters. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to any questions you may have.