



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Assessing FEMA's Readiness for Future Disasters

June 12, 2019

The Committee is meeting today to assess FEMA's readiness for future disasters.

The federal response to Hurricane Maria nearly two years ago was an abject failure. Slow response from the Federal government, FEMA staffing challenges, and botched contracts left millions of our fellow Americans in Puerto Rico to respond to the devastating storm without the help they desperately needed from FEMA and other Federal agencies. We may hear some revisionist history about that response today, but the fact remains that FEMA and its Federal partners were not ready to respond to consecutive major storms in 2017.

Unfortunately, Puerto Rico continues to pay the price. People there are also still suffering from disparate treatment by the President who continues to tweet his disdain for Puerto Ricans working to help their communities recover.

Politicizing disasters or treating communities differently based on their political persuasion should be beneath any President. All Americans deserve the unwavering support of their President and the Federal government in times of crisis, regardless of their political persuasion, economic status, skin color, or where they live. We need to restore the American people's confidence they will have that support.

Those of us who went to Puerto Rico both in the immediate aftermath of the storm and more recently as Puerto Rico continues to recover know firsthand much more remains to be done. As Chairman of this Committee, I am committed to continued oversight of recovery there.

Meanwhile, as recovery from the 2017 hurricanes continues, the 2019 hurricane season got underway June 1. Many of us are concerned whether FEMA has learned the lessons of the 2017 season and will apply those lessons in its response to future disasters. Is FEMA more ready to respond today than it was nearly two years ago? What more remains to be done? How can we ensure FEMA addresses persistent challenges and future risks? I hope to engage with our witnesses to help answer these questions here today.

Fortunately, the Government Accountability Office is working on a series of audits related to these questions at my request and that of several congressional colleagues. Their work so far has found it is imperative FEMA improves its disaster resilience, response, recovery, and workforce management efforts. FEMA's own After-Action Report on the 2017 Hurricane Season acknowledges many of these concerns.

I am particularly interested in how FEMA will address its persistent disaster workforce shortages. Without having the right people in place, trained, and ready to respond, FEMA cannot carry out its mission. This is particularly concerning to me because in my own state, we have experienced severe storms, flooding, and tornadoes already this year.

I want to express my sincere appreciation to the employees at FEMA who work hard on behalf of disaster survivors. Also, I remain concerned about a recently discovered FEMA data breach that exposed the personal addresses and banking information of more than 2 million U.S. disaster survivors. I hope the Acting Administrator can share with us the plan for helping those whose privacy has been compromised and preventing another similar incident.

Finally, I want to express my strong opposition to the President's proposal to slash homeland security and first responder grants by more than \$600 million for fiscal year 2020. These draconian cuts would undermine our Nation's security and preparedness. Congress must reject the President's proposal and ensure State and local partners and our first responders receive the funding necessary to secure our communities.

Before closing, I want to note that the President's nominee for FEMA Administrator will have a confirmation hearing before the Senate later today. I look forward to the Department filling one of its many vacancies and to engaging a confirmed Administrator on the issues facing the agency.

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