



STATEMENT

OF

TONY ROBINSON
REGION 6 ADMINISTRATOR
FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

BEFORE

THE

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“Emergency Preparedness: Examining Federal, State, and Local Coordination in Coastal Communities”

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Chairman D’Esposito, Ranking Member Carter, and the Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to join you today to discuss the mission of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. I am Tony Robinson, Regional Administrator for FEMA Region 6. I have been with FEMA since 1987 and am responsible for covering Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas.

FEMA has a powerful mission: Helping people before, during, and after disasters. In recent years, carrying out that mission has become more challenging and complex. We can no longer speak of a disaster “season.” From atmospheric rivers in January to tornados and wildfires in December, we now face intensified natural disasters throughout the year, often in places not used to experiencing them. In just the last several months, we have seen disasters ranging from record flooding in Vermont, to the nation’s deadliest fire in over a century occurring on the island of Maui, to the first tropical cyclone to make landfall in California since 1938, and the impact of three hurricanes on the Gulf Coast of Florida over the last year.

In the face of this new reality, it is more important than ever that we break the cycle of disaster damage and reconstruction. Instead, we must focus on being better prepared, resilient, and vigilant against these ever-increasing threats. Under Administrator Criswell’s leadership, with bipartisan support in Congress, and in close collaboration with Federal, state, local, Tribal, and territorial governments, community-based organizations, and the private sector, FEMA is leading the way towards greater resilience.

FEMA is not only a response and recovery agency. We also work to mitigate the worst impacts of disasters before they occur. Hazard mitigation saves lives, results in less complex disaster recoveries, and can help us break the disaster cycle.

For example, FEMA is implementing a national strategy to incentivize the adoption of disaster-resistant building codes. We know that one of the most important ways to build resilience across our country, and save lives, is through adoption of hazard-resistant building codes. Communities that have adopted more modern, more resilience-focused building codes have avoided an estimated \$32 billion in losses from natural disasters across the country since the year 2000 alone, which could translate into over \$130 billion in savings by 2040. According to the FY23 Q4 Building Code Adoption Tracking (BCAT) database, only 31 percent of jurisdictions have adopted the current (2021) or next most recent (2018) hazard-resistant building codes. That would mean that slightly more than two out of three communities in the U.S. have not adopted current hazard-resistant building codes, which represents roughly 177 million people at high risk from the growing impacts of natural disasters who do not reside in communities with hazard-resistant building codes. We must close that gap.

We recognize that many mitigation projects are expensive, and financing the construction of these projects is very challenging for communities. That is why we appreciate Congress’ support in authorizing and funding the Safeguarding Tomorrow Revolving Loan Fund (STORM RLF) as another mechanism which FEMA is using to increase the resiliency of our nation by providing new types of financial support to our State, Local, Tribal, and Territorial (SLTT) partners. STORM RLF provides capitalization grants to states, eligible Federally recognized Tribes, and territories to establish revolving loan funds from which they will provide low interest loans to local governments to undertake mitigation projects and activities that will reduce their risks from natural hazards and disasters. At least 40 percent of the loans are expected to be directed to

small or under-resourced communities, as we know that access to traditional grant funding is a significant barrier that small, rural, and other communities with limited capacity face when seeking to undertake mitigation projects.

On September 12th, 2023, FEMA awarded the first round of STORM RLF funding to Louisiana, six other states, and the District of Columbia. A combined \$50 million in grant funding will kick start eight loan programs to help communities reduce their vulnerability to natural hazards and disasters. FEMA awarded Louisiana \$6.9 million, the highest amount among the eight selected recipients. FEMA expects to make available for competition additional STORM RLF funding in 2024.

FEMA's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grant program has also proven to be a very effective tool for mitigation efforts. To date, FEMA has allocated nearly \$4 billion in grant funding to states, local communities, Tribal Nations, and territories to undertake hazard mitigation projects. Following the FY 2022 BRIC national competition, FEMA selected 124 projects across 115 communities. The selections span all 10 FEMA regions, including 38 states, one Tribe, and the District of Columbia.

BRIC is being made more accessible to communities that are the most at risk and most in need through the implementation of the Community Disaster Resilience Zones Act of 2022. FEMA announced the first set of Zones in September that designate high risk disadvantaged communities to receive up to 90% Federal cost share for projects primarily benefiting these Zones.

Here in Louisiana, Jefferson Parish was selected for a project to harden power infrastructure to protect residents, essential businesses, and emergency service providers from hurricane-force winds, as well as upgrade poles and wire to withstand 150-mph winds and lightning strikes. When completed, this project is expected to result in interruption and restoration cost savings of over \$150 million in the next 50 years and, more importantly, will save lives by keeping the power on to communities even during severe weather events.

In Plaquemines Parish, where the historic community of Ironton experienced devastating flood levels as high as 12-14 feet during Hurricane Ida, our BRIC Direct Technical Assistance Program is working with the community to develop an FY 2024 application that would identify solutions to improve the community's drainage system during future events.

As the Committee knows, disaster recovery is often complex, painstaking, and takes a long time. A part of building a resilient nation is also preparing our communities to recover quicker when disasters happen. FEMA just completed the first cohort of one of its new initiatives to help communities prepare for recovery in partnership with U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Together we established a first of its kind Pre-Disaster State Housing Planning Initiative designed to assist participating states in developing or maturing their pre-disaster housing strategy. Over the course of several months, with technical assistance from FEMA and HUD, participating states identified their existing housing stock in the state and localities, documented current and potential strategies for temporary and permanent housing options to be pursued after a disaster, while simultaneously creating strategies to provide resilient, affordable housing to survivors as soon as possible after an event. I would like to

commend Louisiana for being one of the first four states across the nation to join this new initiative.

With regard to individuals and families, under Administrator Criswell's leadership, we have taken concrete steps to simplify and create more equitable solutions for assistance through our Individual Assistance (IA) program that have led to real, and tangible positive impacts for disaster survivors. In 2021, we expanded methods of ownership verification for homeowners whose properties had been handed down informally through generations, as well as expanding methods of occupancy verification for owners and renters to prove the disaster-damaged home was the primary residence. Both ownership and occupancy verification also allow self-certification as a last resort due to challenges with obtaining traditional forms of documentation. As a result, in 2022, an additional \$348 million dollars of assistance went to more than 78,000 renters, and an additional \$444 million dollars went to more than 57,000 homeowners. Previously, these individuals would have been denied FEMA assistance, complicating their recovery.

FEMA is also working to simplify our Public Assistance Program to streamline the distribution of aid to communities. We are refining information collection forms to enable applicants to complete project applications on their own and reduce paperwork. By implementing the requirements of the Small Project Efficient and Effective Disaster Recovery (SPEED) Act, less information will be required for small projects – projects less than \$1 million – which will accelerate recovery funds to these communities. To provide some perspective, approximately 94 percent of projects are small. The forms will also include questions designed to better facilitate support for underserved communities.

We also changed how to calculate the threshold for property losses for survivors to qualify for Direct Housing assistance, which ensures more precise damage evaluations regardless of the size of the damaged home. The previous calculations could disadvantage homeowners with more modest homes, who might have suffered comparable damage to larger homes but were receiving less assistance. The new calculation methodology is more accurate in providing assistance that is proportionate to the damage sustained.

FEMA also is in the process of making it easier for survivors to apply for disaster assistance – beginning with the online application available on DisasterAssistance.gov. Instead of requiring survivors to answer questions for every possible program, including for services they don't need, we're shifting to a tailored, needs-based assessment process. The new process will improve the customer experience and reduce the burden for applicants by providing a more intuitive application process. Notably, this deliverable fulfills an important commitment of the DHS Secretary from Executive Order 14058, to “design and deliver a streamlined, online assistance application.”

FEMA has also contributed administrative data and staff perspectives to cross-agency projects to improve the recovery experience for people impacted by disasters. One effort focuses on administrative burden analysis across the recovery experience, and the other focuses on meeting survivors with a trauma-informed approach.

There is still much to do to build a more resilient America, but FEMA is well positioned to address the increasing range and complexity of disasters, support the diversity of communities we serve, and meet our nation's growing expectations of the Agency. We appreciate and continue to need Congress' support as we execute our mission of helping people before, during, and after disasters.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.