



One Hundred Sixteenth Congress
Committee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

May 28, 2020

The Honorable Peter T. Gaynor
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street, SW, Room 8 SW
Washington, D.C. 20024

Dear Administrator Gaynor:

As our country continues to grapple with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the threat posed by natural disasters is on the rise. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) plays a critical role in preparing for and responding to both natural disasters and the ongoing pandemic, raising concerns about the agency's ability to respond to multiple disasters simultaneously. We write to urge you to ensure FEMA is ready to respond to natural disasters as it responds to COVID-19, request a briefing on FEMA's efforts in this regard, and offer our support during this critical time.

Already this year, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has classified two severe weather events as "billion-dollar weather and climate disasters," a term NOAA applies to weather and climate disasters causing at least \$1 billion in damages.¹ This month saw the first two named storms of 2020, even before the official start of the Atlantic hurricane season.² Warmer sea surface temperatures in the tropical Atlantic raise concerns that the hurricane season could bring above-normal activity. Indeed, NOAA's recent hurricane season outlook projected a 60 percent likelihood of an above-normal season, with a 70 percent chance of 13 to 19 named storms, 6 to 10 of which could become hurricanes, 3 to 6 of which could become major hurricanes. NOAA projections suggest at least 128 million people in the U.S. are living in areas with an elevated flooding risk this spring season, "with 28 million at risk for moderate or greater flooding, and 1.2 million at risk for major flooding."³ Meanwhile, the National

¹ See U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Centers for Environmental Information, Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters: Events <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/events> (accessed May 1, 2020), listing the following: "Southeaster Tornadoes and Northern Storms and Flooding January 2020;" and "Tennessee Tornadoes and Southeastern Severe Weather March 2020," as billion-dollar weather and climate disasters.

² See Meghan Bartles, *Satellites see Tropical Storm Arthur, the Atlantic's 1st named storm of 2020, from space*, Space.com (May 18, 2020), <https://www.space.com/tropical-storm-arthur-first-satellite-views.html>; U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Hurricane Center and Central Pacific Hurricane Center, Tropical Depression Bertha, https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/refresh/graphics_at2+shtml/121017.shtml?cone (accessed May 28, 2020).

³ U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Weather Service, Office of Hydrologic Development, *2020 National Hydrologic Assessment* (Mar. 19, 2020), <http://nws.noaa.gov/oh/2020NHA.html>.

Interagency Fire Center outlook report raises concerns that lower than average snowpacks and slightly intensified drought risks could have implications for increased wildfires.⁴

Given these projections, we are concerned about FEMA's capacity to manage natural disaster preparedness and response efforts during the ongoing pandemic. In a May 3, 2020, interview, you acknowledged the challenge COVID poses, saying "[t]his pandemic, it is historic, it is unprecedented in many ways for FEMA."⁵ Even before the pandemic, in a June 12, 2019, hearing before the Committee, you recognized your agency's longstanding staffing limitations saying, "It has been a struggle for FEMA to make sure that we have enough disaster responders in reserve, we are probably short a few thousand employees when it comes to reserve."⁶ Multiple audits by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that the agency experienced problems training staff for disasters and ensuring deployed staff had the skills and abilities to effectively perform their duties, and that FEMA needed to improve its use of both pre- and post-disaster contracts.⁷ Clearly, FEMA has struggled to respond to multiple large-scale disasters contemporaneously, such as during the 2017 hurricane season.⁸

Going forward, FEMA needs to take a proactive role in procuring the staffing and resources necessary to respond, keeping in mind that conventional disaster response strategies, such as communal shelters and volunteer recovery and supply distribution efforts, could pose increased health and safety risks during the pandemic, particularly for underserved populations.⁹ We look forward to engaging with you

⁴ See U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, *Busy Atlantic hurricane season predicted for 2020* (May 21, 2020), <https://www.noaa.gov/media-release/busy-atlantic-hurricane-season-predicted-for-2020>; Philip J. Klotzbach, Michael M. Bell, and Jhordanne Jones, *Extended Range Forecast of Atlantic Seasonal Hurricane Activity and Landfall Strike Probability for 2020*, Colorado State University, Department of Atmospheric Science (Apr. 2, 2020), <https://tropical.colostate.edu/media/sites/11/2020/04/2020-04.pdf>; Maya Wei-Haas, *What happens when natural disasters strike during a pandemic?*, National Geographic (Apr. 17, 2020), <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/what-happens-when-natural-disasters-strike-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>; National Interagency Fire Center, *National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook* (May 1, 2020), https://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/outlooks/monthly_seasonal_outlook.pdf; Nathan Rott, "Hope Isn't A Strategy." *How to Prepare for A Natural Disaster During COVID-19*, NPR (Apr. 11, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/11/829193312/hope-isn-t-a-strategy-how-to-prepare-for-a-natural-disaster-during-covid-19>.

⁵ Jonathan Swan, *Exclusive: FEMA braces for COVID-infected hurricane season*, Axios (May 3, 2020), <https://www.axios.com/fema-coronavirus-hurricane-season-ef660cda-f4b3-4002-b8ac-71438c8edebd.html>.

⁶ See U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security, *Hearing on Assessing FEMA's Readiness for Future Disasters*, 116th Cong. (June 12, 2019), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-116hhrg38302/pdf/CHRG-116hhrg38302.pdf> | <https://homeland.house.gov/activities/hearings/assessing-femas-readiness-for-future-disasters>; and E.A. Crunden, *FEMA admits it's 'short a few thousand employees' as hurricane season begins*, ThinkProgress (June 12, 2019), <https://archive.thinkprogress.org/fema-short-staffed-hurricane-season-2019-74093f98acb4/>.

⁷ See U.S. Government Accountability Office, *FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Address Deployment and Staff Development Challenges* (GAO-20-360) (May 4, 2020), <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-20-360>; Government Accountability Office, *2017 Disaster Contracting: Action Needed to Better Ensure More Effective Use and Management of Advance Contracts* (GAO-19-93) (December 2018); and Government Accountability Office, *2017 Disaster Contracting: Actions Needed to Improve the Use of Post-Disaster Contracts to Support Response and Recovery* (GAO-19-281) (April 2019).

⁸ See Jennifer Shutt, *Coronavirus wallops disaster agencies as storms, fires approach*, Roll Call (May 20, 2020), https://www.rollcall.com/2020/05/20/coronavirus-wallops-disaster-agencies-as-storms-fires-approach/?utm_source=morningheadlines&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletters&utm_content=05/20/2020.

⁹ Letter from Congressman Donald M. Payne, Jr., Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery, and Members of House Committee on Homeland Security, to Peter T. Gaynor, Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency (Apr. 16, 2020); Maya Wei-Haas, *What happens when natural disasters strike during a pandemic?*, National Geographic (Apr. 17, 2020), <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/what>

on these issues. To that end, we request that FEMA brief the Committee on the “COVID-19 Pandemic Operational Guidance for the 2020 Hurricane Season” and on FEMA’s plans for responding to natural disasters during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the upcoming hurricane season.¹⁰

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter.

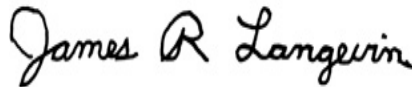
Sincerely,



BENNIE G. THOMPSON
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security



SHEILA JACKSON LEE
Member of Congress



JAMES LANGEVIN
Member of Congress



CEDRIC RICHMOND
Member of Congress



DONALD PAYNE
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[happens-when-natural-disasters-strike-during-coronavirus-pandemic/](#); Nathan Rott, “*Hope Isn’t A Strategy.*” *How to Prepare for A Natural Disaster During COVID-19*, NPR (Apr. 11, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/11/829193312/hope-isn-t-a-strategy-how-to-prepare-for-a-natural-disaster-during-covid-19>.

¹⁰ The Committee is in receipt of FEMA’s recently released document entitled, “COVID-19 Pandemic Operational Guidance for the 2020 Hurricane Season.” However, in addition to information on that document’s development and contents, the Committee seeks additional information on FEMA’s own internal comprehensive plan for natural disaster response during the pandemic. See U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, *COVID-19 Pandemic Operational Guidance for the 2020 Hurricane Season* (May 2020), https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1589997234798-adb5ce5cb98a7a89e3e1800becf0eb65/2020_Hurricane_Pandemic_Plan.pdf.



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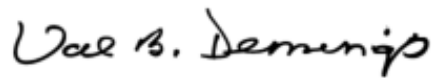
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