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Chairwoman Demings, Ranking Member Cammack, and distinguished members of the Committee, I would like to thank you for holding this important hearing today regarding the risks and effects of climate change on homeland security, particularly how disasters impact our communities, our homes, and lifeline infrastructure.

I am Pamela Williams, the Executive Director of the BuildStrong Coalition, and it is an honor for me to join the distinguished panel of witnesses today to discuss how disaster mitigation intersects with climate adaptation and homeland security and must serve as a core component of the national conversation on resilient infrastructure and communities. Investments in mitigation and resilient construction, particularly before the next major storm, not only drives down disaster costs and losses, but also builds resilience in our citizens, neighborhoods, regions, and across the United States.

Background and Introduction

My journey began over 20 years ago, aiding the City of Des Moines, Iowa in recovery from the devastating 1993 Midwest floods. During my career, I have served at the federal, state, and local levels, dealing with disaster policy. I have helped local governments adopt and enforce codes and standards as they attempted to rebuild from catastrophe, guided states toward prioritizing disaster preparedness and mitigation efforts, and worked in the trenches with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) addressing the consequences of this country's most catastrophic disasters. I was honored to serve the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure for five years, particularly as members developed the legislative response to the unprecedented 2017 disaster season. I have a deep appreciation for the emergency management profession, the challenges in driving responsible disaster policy, and the tremendous, tireless efforts put forth every day by FEMA, all levels of government, and our private sector partners in trying to get to a better answer on disasters.

Today, it is my privilege to serve as the Executive Director of the BuildStrong Coalition and to testify before you today on its behalf. The BuildStrong Coalition, formed in 2011 to respond to an increasing number of severe disasters, is made up of a diverse group of members representing firefighters, emergency responders, emergency managers, insurers, engineers, architects, contractors, and manufacturers, as well as consumer organizations, code specialists, and many others committed to building a more disaster resilient nation. The BuildStrong Coalition has been a partner with Congress in its work to investigate causes of, and devise the solutions to, the rising cost of disasters in the U.S. We have been honored to help identify opportunities for policy changes that promote mitigation and the smart investment of federal resources to address our country's increasing number of severe and costly weather events, including informing several provisions of the landmark Disaster Recovery Reform Act of 2018.

In the face of growing climate risk, we must be focused on what legislative changes and policy initiatives are needed to appropriately incentivize smart mitigation and resilience activities and practices, while also removing the challenges and obstacles that may stand in the way or hinder the progress of disaster resilience. We implore the Committee to use this hearing to shape the resilience conversation across this country — in order to create a Resilient America.

This Committee stands poised to increase disaster resilience in the U.S. and ensure that resilience remains at the forefront of the infrastructure, COVID-19 recovery, and disaster assistance reform conversations. The Committee must seize the opportunity to influence the overall national resilience strategy and establish the framework for the next chapter in increasing disaster resilience in the U.S. This Committee must fill the leadership role in addressing climate impacts by incentivizing and providing resources to facilitate smart, climate-conscious behaviors and mitigation and removing the moral hazards and policy impediments inhibiting decision makers from creating resilient systems and communities.

BuildStrong is excited to join congressional leaders like you as we identify opportunities for policy changes that promote disaster resilience and the smart investment of federal resources to address our country's vulnerable homes and communities, aging infrastructure, and the increasing number of severe and costly weather events. Together, we can help save the lives and property of our citizens.

DRRA and BRIC: Transforming Disaster Recovery and Mitigation

The increase in the frequency and severity of natural catastrophes in the United States clearly illustrates the need for our country to invest in the resilience of the structures in which we live and work and the lifeline infrastructure that supports the essential aspects of our everyday lives. According to Munich Re, hurricanes, wildfires, and other disasters across the United States caused $95 billion in damage last year, the fourth highest cost on record.[1] In 2020, North Atlantic hurricane season records were broken with thirty named storms forming, and twelve making landfall. It was the most active wildfire year on record across the west with nearly 10.3 million acres consumed. And according to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), in 2020, there were 22 weather and climate disaster events with losses exceeding $1 billion each across the United States — shattering the previous annual record of 16 events that occurred in 2011 and 2017 — which included tropical cyclones, severe storms, drought, wildfire event, and a derecho.[2]

In 2018, Congress took several key steps in recognition of unsustainable impacts of disasters by passing the bipartisan Disaster Recovery Reform Act of 2018 (DRRA). These changes to disaster law and policy support and incentivize states and localities to adopt enhanced mitigation measures to protect lives and taxpayer dollars, remove some of the moral hazards that increase risk, and transform disaster resilience in this country. This legislation provides FEMA, in particular, more tools to help impacted communities recover smarter and stronger and end the cycle of build, damage, rebuild.

The true game changer in DRRA is the creation of an additional set-aside of 6 percent annual disaster spending for the purpose of funding greater investment in mitigation **before** a disaster. This change represents a significant increase in reliable funding for grants for state, local,

[1] "Record hurricane season and major wildfires – The natural disaster figures for 2020," Munich Re, January 7, 2021. https://www.munichre.com/en/company/media-relations/media-information-and-corporate-news/media-information/2021/2020-natural-disasters-balance.html. Accessed June 4, 2021.
[2] Smith, Adam B., "2020 U.S. billion-dollar weather and climate disasters in historical context," National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), January 8, 2021. https://www.climate.gov/news-features/blogs/beyond-data/2020-us-billion-dollar-weather-and-climate-disasters-historical. Accessed June 4, 2021.

tribal, and territorial governments and communities that will enable them to better plan and execute cost-effective risk mitigation projects. With the enactment of the DRRA, FEMA was given the opportunity and the challenge to create a new, permanent mechanism to provide substantial funding for cost-effective, risk-reducing pre-disaster mitigation projects.

FEMA took these new and expanded authorities and in 2020 launched the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) Grant Program. We applaud FEMA for their unprecedented efforts in developing and implementing this transformational program. FEMA has endeavored to be transparent and to engage stakeholders throughout the process. Thanks to this leadership, BRIC is now a nationwide, pre-disaster mitigation grant program that will impact both public infrastructure and individual preparedness by increasing residential resilience through structural retrofits and smart building techniques.

In its inaugural year, FEMA offered $500 million through the BRIC program. In its first year of funding, during a global pandemic when emergency managers were overwhelmed and strapped for resources, FEMA received almost $3.6 billion in requested projects. While we look forward to the award announcements later this summer, FEMA and the Administration have already announced a funding increase to $1 billion for Fiscal Year 2021. It will be critical for FEMA to provide the official Notice of Funding Availability as soon as possible to give states and sub-applicants as much lead time and guidance as possible. We will have much to learn from the initial round of BRIC awards, what is working and what is not working, what is discouraging communities from applying, what aspects of the program ignore issues of equality and fairness, and where improvements can be made.

FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell has stated that one of her top priorities is to build a new culture of disaster resilience. But we know that the infrastructure and residential needs of the nation far exceed the resources available. And new funding alone cannot solve a problem of this magnitude. Investments must be deployed wisely and in a manner that realizes its full benefit.

Recommendations

The BuildStrong Coalition has developed the following policy recommendations and principles, supported by data and science, that are critical to driving resilience across the homeland.

I. Secure More Resources for Mitigation

Increase the funding for retrofits and investments in resilience before the next disaster, climate impact, or catastrophic failure.

Mitigation saves lives, property, and taxpayer money. Mitigation also saves the environment. But the federal resources to help build state and local capacity and fund risk-reducing, cost-effective mitigation projects that harden critical lifeline infrastructure and help individuals invest in residential resilience are woefully inadequate. FEMA and other Federal Agencies need more tools to help impacted communities recover smarter and stronger and end the cycle of build, damage, rebuild. For example, while doubling the amount of funds available under FEMA's BRIC program represents a historical increase in resources available for pre-disaster mitigation and resilience projects, the fact that FEMA received almost $3.6 billion in project

applications illustrates the scope of the need for far greater investment in resilience.

And we know that this is a smart use of Federal resources that will save taxpayer dollars. Federal funding that promotes better land use, modern science applied to home construction, and increased mitigation measures can dramatically reduce the devastation brought by these disasters. Based on the findings of the National Institute of Building Sciences (NIBS):

- Adopting Model Building Codes Saves $11 per $1 Invested
- Federal Mitigation Grants Save $6 per $1 Invested
- Exceeding Codes Save $4 per $1 Invested
- Mitigating Infrastructure Saves $4 per $1 Invested

II. Create Resilient Homes and Communities through Strong Building Codes

Create incentives for building stronger and tie existing federal funding streams to the adoption and enforcement of strong, modern building codes, in order to better protect homes, families, and communities.

Individuals and communities are kept safe in times of disasters through the strength of their homes and the infrastructure that provides critical resources and services in affected areas. This is particularly prevalent as we learn lessons from COVID-19 and begin to understand how to increase resilience to wildfires. Disaster-resilient and sustainable construction and the use of stronger building codes have been proven to save lives, reduce the damage of natural disasters, and protect the environment. In fact, one of the most cost-effective ways communities can guard against disasters is to adopt and enforce hazard-resistant building codes. Unfortunately, only a handful of states have adopted the most modern building codes, and many lack the resources to adequately implement codes. To help correct this paradigm at the federal level involves creating incentives that encourage state and local governments to adopt modern building codes, while simultaneously equipping communities with the tools and resources needed to carry out meaningful enforcement regimes.

In November 2020, FEMA completed a landmark building code study which concluded that modern building codes lead to major reductions in property losses from natural disasters. This study showed that over a 20-year period cities and counties with modern building codes would avoid at least $32 billion in losses from natural disasters, when compared to jurisdictions without modern building codes.[3] Adopting building codes is the single most effective thing we can do to save lives and protect property into the future. Further, the additional cost of construction features that allow buildings to survive natural disasters are not expensive and on average are less than two percent of total construction costs.[4]

With the return on investment and the level of resilience these investments help communities achieve, federal programs need to drive the adoption and enforcement of building codes, provide

[3] "Protecting Communities and Saving Money: The Case for Adopting Building Codes," Federal Emergency Management Agency, November 2020. https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-11/fema_building-codes-save_brochure.pdf. Accessed June 4, 2021.
[4] NIBS, "Natural Hazard Mitigation Saves: 2019 Report," 2019.

resources to help communities, and make the critical link between program requirements and smart decisions.

III. Resilient Lifeline Infrastructure

Require investments in lifeline infrastructure and those resources should be directed at risk-reducing, cost effective investments to promote the hardening of lifeline infrastructure and disaster-resilient construction and the adoption and implementation of risk-reducing standards.

Disaster-resilient and sustainable construction and infrastructure is important to reduce the damage of natural disasters and protect the environment. Lifeline infrastructure refers to electric power, water and wastewater systems, natural gas and liquid fuel, telecommunication, and transportation. Disruptions in these systems due to disasters threaten lives and impede community recovery. Lifelines provide indispensable services that enable the continuous operation of critical business and government functions, and without prompt restoration would risk health, safety, and economic security. Focusing on these lifelines allow decision-makers to better identify key risks and facilities and more readily target projects that can help protect or restore critical functions during a disaster. By investing in the resilience of these systems, we can reduce, if not eliminate, the impact of disasters, allowing key infrastructure to be restored and reducing the duration and cost of recovery.

Through the application of the highest building codes, standards, and technologies to these systems and ensuring access to resources to invest in mitigation by owners of infrastructure, we can ensure system-wide increases in resilience in key lifeline infrastructure. This not only involves applying the highest codes and standards, but also leveraging resources to support and incentivize the adoption and enforcement of building codes and professional standards. This includes standards that strengthen and harden infrastructure, including the nation's electric grid, against all hazards including wind, wildfire, flood, seismic, and ice. Disaster recovery and mitigation projects should also incorporate smart technologies to improve monitoring and distribution for lifeline infrastructure and require the use of resilient materials standards for lifeline infrastructure.

Tremendous strides have been made in disaster resilience policy, with the passage of DRRA, but there is must more to be done and the progress we have made must be protected. As the leaders in disaster policy, you must remain steadfast and ensure that infrastructure, COVID recovery, and other disaster-related legislation continues to leverage the investment of federal resources in a smart way to increase resiliency.

IV. Incentivize Investments in Resilience

Incentivize investments in resilience through tax benefits, grant conditions, and easing administrative burdens.

In addition to more resources for mitigation and communities, both public and private entities need incentives to drive their investments in mitigation. Whether by supporting the creation of federal tax incentives that reward resilient behavior, the development of mitigation tax breaks, or other incentives, individuals and businesses will find it easier to invest in resiliency, including

undertaking activities like retrofitting homes, if these resources are available. This would also foster private sector investment in mitigation through new financing opportunities. Targeted tax incentives and removing tax penalties will encourage resilient construction techniques to withstand damage from strong winds or flooding and prevent losses from wildfires and seismic events. Through these investments, homeowners and communities ultimately save money through tax savings and avoided recovery costs and losses in the next disaster.

The tax code and financial instruments can also be leveraged to drive creative financing and solutions that target underserved populations. By leveraging existing, publicly available data, like FEMA's National Risk Index[5], both community leaders and private investors can come together to analyze key risk factors, including social vulnerability, to help prioritize communities and projects for resources and technical assistance.

V. Use Resilient American Products

Ensure the use of resilient, American-made products in the construction and retrofit of lifeline infrastructure.

Now more than ever, we need to support American jobs and American products. An investment in resilience across American communities must include long-term, non-emergency construction projects, including the hardening of lifeline infrastructure, that maximize the use of American-made goods, products, and materials. These efforts create jobs and fuel the economic engines in our communities.

VI. Build Capacity

Ensure that state, local, tribal, and regional entities are given the tools and resources to increase capacity and capability to identify risks and hazards and mitigate those risks before the crisis occurs.

For this country to be successful in enhancing our resiliency, we must focus on capacity building for state and local governments and turn to considerations of sustainability, adaptability, and creative financial instruments that can be leveraged to drive socially responsible investments in resilience. State, local, and tribal governments must increase their ability to mitigate against all hazards. Accordingly, they must increase their ability to identify hazards and successfully implement these funds to accomplish selected risk-reducing projects. Every level of government must understand how funding, programs, and resources can be applied and leveraged to make homes, businesses, and communities less vulnerable to severe weather. They need help connecting the dots between resources and brick and mortar programs that can strengthen the build environment for the future. We all have a role to play to help increase engagement and education efforts on mitigation planning, program requirements, and opportunity awareness.

Building capacity also involves simplifying and streamlining federal programs to make the resources more accessible and equitable to the communities most at risk. As resources are increased and spent, FEMA, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and this Committee,

[5] Federal Emergency Management Agency, "National Risk Index for Natural Hazards (NRI)," https://www.fema.gov/floodmaps/products-tools/national-risk-index. Accessed June 4, 2021.

will need to focus on effective grants management and oversight, including oversight by the DHS Inspector General, and how to leverage them to invest systemically and systematically in national resilience, even across agencies.

Further, regulatory controls must be loosened to facilitate and encourage public-private partnerships. Governments must work with the private sector to increase community and national resilience. The private sector owns the vast majority of the Nation's critical lifeline infrastructure and key — roughly 85 percent.[6] The private sector is currently conducting high-level work throughout the resilience and mitigation arena and there is tremendous opportunity to utilize expertise and industry knowledge, take advantage of existing programs, identify best practices, and incorporate lessons learned from the private sector. By leveraging the private sector and encouraging and facilitating public-private partnerships, we can maximize available resources for the benefit of the entire country. Community leaders need to be connected with partners that can catalyze financial resources and human capital. Organizations like BuildStrong, the Institute for Business and Home Safety, and the International Code Council, among others, are serving as force multipliers, helping build capacity for investments in resilience.

Conclusion

As the 2021 Atlantic Hurricane Season gets underway, we are once again reminded that time is of the essence to ensure that we do everything we can to continue to incentivize and facilitate mitigation throughout this country. And in the face of climate risk, the BuildStrong Coalition will continue to work to create and enact policies, as the Coalition has done for the past decade, that have a real impact on helping individuals, businesses, and communities prepare for, and survive disasters.

Chairwoman Demings and Ranking Member Cammack, thank you for convening this hearing and raising these important issues. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

[6] Government Accountability Office, *The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Critical Infrastructure Protection Cost-Benefit Report*, June 26, 2009.