



November 9, 2017

The Honorable Ron Johnson
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Claire McCaskill
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Johnson and Ranking Member McCaskill:

I appreciate the opportunity to submit this written testimony at the request of the Office of the Ranking Member, Senator Claire McCaskill. The Committee's October 31 hearing, "2017 Hurricane Season: Oversight of the Federal Response," focused on an important and timely set of issues regarding our nation's response to major disasters.

I am a Senior Policy Analyst for the Project On Government Oversight (POGO). Founded in 1981, POGO is a nonpartisan, independent watchdog that champions good government reforms. Its investigations into corruption, misconduct, and conflicts of interest achieve a more effective, accountable, open, and ethical federal government. POGO's mission has long included working to strengthen the effectiveness and accountability of federal government agencies through bipartisan, fact-based policy analysis.

Rising Numbers of Major Disasters: The New Normal

This year has seen a lot of tragic firsts for national disasters. Four major hurricanes came ashore within six weeks in the Gulf and Caribbean, a staggering new record. The resulting disasters affected millions of people living in the paths of the storms, causing death, injury, and illness, and destroying or damaging homes and businesses. An estimated 3.5 million people have registered for federal disaster assistance so far this year.¹

The devastation will be long-lasting in huge numbers of American communities along the Gulf Coast and in the Caribbean Territories. Large numbers of homes and buildings are still at just the beginning stages of repair, and Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands face months before a majority of people have power and clean water in their homes and communities. And the hurricanes are not the whole story. The deadliest wild fires in California history struck in October, killing dozens and wiping out whole

¹ Deborah Barfield Berry, "Congress tees up another \$36 billion in disaster aid for hurricane and wildfire damage," *USA Today*, October 11, 2017.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/10/11/congress-tees-up-another-36-billion-disaster-aid-hurricane-and-wildfire-damage/752894001/> (Downloaded November 8, 2017)

neighborhoods. Additional disasters were declared for floods, fires, and other events across the nation, which, though smaller as far as the relative levels of destruction, still had a devastating impact for the local communities.

The response by survivors, their neighbors, and emergency responders were at heroic levels: press accounts describe rescues, neighbors helping neighbors, and exhausted first responders and aid workers providing life-saving assistance.

The questions the nation needs to ask now are whether we were prepared as we needed to be, and are there lessons to be learned for future major disasters? The short answer to these questions: no, we were not as prepared as we should have been, and yes, there are lessons that we can and *must* learn from the 2017 disasters.

Clearly, there are lessons for Congress and the Administration to learn. It seems that after every major disaster comes the realization that a response to major disasters costs money. And every few years, Congress, led by those representing the affected states, arrange for additional billions of dollars in funding. These “emergency” funding bills are separate from the normal budgeting process, thereby not treating disasters as predictable expenses that are part of costly budget scoring and planning. This results in a slowed recovery due to financial uncertainties and politicization of disasters.

Preparing for major fires, storms, and earthquakes should be part of the normal functions of government. We as a nation must recognize that large disasters are no longer uncommon, and while the specifics may be unpredictable, the response shouldn't be.

Trend of Destruction Is Increasing

First, let's put the recent disasters into perspective.

Both the quantity and severity of 2017 disasters are historically noteworthy. Ten Atlantic hurricanes formed so far this year, the first time we saw that number in more than a century. And of the four that reached U.S. soil, one—Irma—reached Category 5, the highest category.² Coming in close, Harvey and Maria (also having earlier reached Category 5) both made landfall as Category 4. Smaller in strength only by comparison, Nate made it to Category 2.

Did we as a nation do enough to prepare and respond to the disasters? Unfortunately, the answer by the U.S. government's own metrics is no. The Federal Emergency Management Agency—the lead agency in preparing for, and responding to, the nation's disasters—had a goal of “restoring basic services and community functionality” within 60 days, focused on “essential city service facilities, utilities, transportation routes, schools, neighborhood retail business, and offices and other workplaces.”³ This was a goal we did not reach in Puerto Rico or the U.S. Virgin Islands.

² NOAA, Environmental Centers for Environmental Information, “Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters: Table of Events.” <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/events/US/1980-2017> (Downloaded November 8, 2017)

³ Federal Emergency Management Agency, *FEMA Strategic Plan: Fiscal Years 2011 – 2014*, February 2011, Updated July 30, 2013. <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/25275> (Downloaded November 8, 2017)

The level of disaster suffering of 2017 will be repeated in years to come. Major hurricanes will continue to strike the United States. Wildfires will continue to happen over what is looking like an increasing length of the season.⁴ Earthquakes, tornadoes, tsunamis, and other disasters will strike with little notice, and also result in great destruction.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration tracks the cost of U.S. weather-related disasters, and the trend toward more and costlier damage each year is clear.⁵ The number of billion-dollar hurricane disasters in 2016 was the second highest, behind 2011. Looking more long-term, the average number of such disasters almost doubled since 1980. The four major hurricanes of 2017—Harvey, Irma, Maria, and Nate—resulted in combined damages of \$200 billion to \$300 billion, likely leading to a new record for total dollar damage for one year. For comparison, the previous record of annual disaster costs was in 2005, due largely to Hurricane Katrina’s \$161 billion (inflation adjusted) in damage.⁶

The increase in disaster costs cannot be dismissed as mere chance, or an uncommon problem during a few unlucky years. Weather and climate are not the only factors resulting in an increase in damage costs. Rising population and development patterns—how many people and buildings are in the area of a disaster—are the other factors.

Leadership is Key

So what has 2017 taught us? First, strong government leadership in disaster response is key.

Having well trained, experienced, and dedicated staff at all levels is critical. You can’t outsource emergency response, nor can the nation simply wait for a disaster to strike before it gets its act together.

Of course, in a disaster, every hour counts. By the time a disaster happens, it is too late to start figuring out the response. Planning and working together *before* a disaster is how agencies really know the nuts and bolts of what to do. And as our responses to hurricanes from Katrina to Maria showed us, disasters require preparation months and years in advance.⁷ Local responders and leaders do not have time to put together a plan when the threat is looming. This is even truer for a “no notice

⁴ Matt Richtel and Fernando Santos, “Wildfires, Once Confined to a Season, Burn Earlier and Longer,” *The New York Times*, April 12, 2016.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/13/science/wildfires-season-global-warming.html>
(Downloaded November 8, 2017)

⁵ Adam B. Smith, “2016: A Historic year for billion-dollar weather and climate disasters in U.S.,” Climate.gov, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, January 9, 2017.

<https://www.climate.gov/news-features/blogs/beyond-data/2016-historic-year-billion-dollar-weather-and-climate-disasters-us> (Downloaded November 8, 2017)

⁶ Historic damage numbers are from NOAA, National Centers for Environmental Information, “Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters.” <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/events/US/1980-2017> (Downloaded November 8, 2017)

⁷ For an outline of disaster planning steps, see Department of Homeland Security, *National Preparedness Goal—Second Edition*, September 2015.

https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1443799615171-2aae90be55041740f97e8532fc680d40/National_Preparedness_Goal_2nd_Edition.pdf (Downloaded November 8, 2017)

event” such as an earthquake. Without proper planning, federal agencies, including the military, would show up late or ill prepared.

The good news is that, since Katrina, FEMA’s disaster preparation and response mission has received a lot more attention. Since Katrina, its leaders have consistently been people who are disaster and emergency response professionals, not just political appointees who learn the disaster trade after appointment. The current Administrator, Brock Long, came to FEMA having led Alabama’s emergency management agency.⁸ And his predecessors in the last Administration came with similarly strong backgrounds, such as former Administrator Craig Fugate who had headed Florida’s disaster agency.⁹

But FEMA doesn’t, and cannot, do the job on its own.

State and local government’s play key roles in preparing for and responding to the disasters in their collective backyards.

Equally important, FEMA operates much of the federal response in coordination with other federal agencies. FEMA’s National Incident Support Manual¹⁰ describes how an operation is supposed to unfold. FEMA puts forward the “mission assignments” to get “resources”—the equipment, supplies, and trained people—to the scene: Although FEMA has some resources of its own ready to go, it is not enough and the agency largely works through the mission assignments to its federal partners for getting the quantities and types of resources to effectively respond. When FEMA wants to send generators or medical teams, the agency makes the requests to the different federal agencies with the required resource. The Department of Defense has transportation assets such as Army trucks and Air Force cargo planes, Health and Human Services the medical teams, and so on. And FEMA will ask for them.

But FEMA cannot give orders to other agencies; it can only make requests. Even though representatives of the agencies have worked together, there can still be disagreements among the bureaucracies.

Some more good news: since Katrina federal agencies are required by law to formally prepare and practice their responses and how they work together. Every two years, the federal government tries out the agencies’ response to disaster with the “National Exercise Program.”¹¹ The officials responsible for coordinating are brought together in a room, and a scenario is played out. In 2014 it was an Alaskan earthquake, and for 2016 the exercise focused on major acts of terrorism.

Hurricane Sandy in 2012 is an example of how good leadership can result in improved responsiveness to a national disaster. Hurricane Sandy was the second largest Atlantic storm on record, and made landfall in southern New Jersey, knocking out power for more than eight million people and causing tens of billions of dollars in damage. During the response and recovery phases,

⁸ Federal Emergency Management Agency, “William B. ‘Brock’ Long.” <https://www.fema.gov/brock-long>

⁹ Federal Emergency Management Agency, “William Craig Fugate.” <https://www.fema.gov/william-craig-fugate>

¹⁰ Federal Emergency Response Agency, *FEMA National Incident Support Manual*, February 2011.

https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/20130726-1821-25045-8641/fema_national_incident_support_manual_03_23_2011.pdf (Downloaded November 8, 2017)

¹¹ Federal Emergency Management Agency, “National Exercise Program.” <https://www.fema.gov/national-exercise-program> (Downloaded November 8, 2017)

President Obama established an ad hoc interagency Energy Restoration Task Force to find ways to restore power and ensure that the federal agencies effectively work together. One challenge identified during the Sandy recovery was getting a large enough number of specialized power line repair trucks, such as the “cherry pickers” used to reconnect the power lines. Many could simply be driven in across state lines, but many others needed to be air-lifted in. Due to the work of the interagency task force, the Pentagon delivered 229 vehicles by air.¹²

The “Sandy FEMA After-Action Report” had clear conclusions, including the need to “prepare for incidents that are larger and more complex.”¹³ That report also stated that, “FEMA recognizes that it must plan for even larger, more severe storms and disasters.”¹⁴

The National Exercise Program continues to identify disaster response problems, and to note the lessons learned. In fact, the Department of Homeland Security keeps track of gaps in the response preparations. However, not all of the lessons learned are actually put into practices. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) noted that implementation of corrective actions is not well tracked. As a result, DHS and FEMA “cannot provide a comprehensive picture of the status of national preparedness.”¹⁵

Upping Our Game: Realizing Major Disasters Are the New Normal

The large and devastating Hurricane Katrina and our nation’s response to it sparked a much needed debate over how to improve our response to major disasters. In 2006, Congress passed the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act,¹⁶ which updated critical laws and policies. Based on the work of Congressional special investigative committees that examined the aftermath, the law helped define the interagency goals and preparations for major disasters.

Among its new goals, FEMA preparations for a major disaster must assume the likelihood of little to no warning, and of “cascading effects,” where one disaster creates others. It is no longer adequate for the federal government to prepare for an earthquake, but instead it must expect that it can lead to a dam breaking or a nuclear power plant leaking radiation.¹⁷

The Japanese Fukushima disaster, or more correctly disasters, points to what FEMA should now be prepared for. On March 11, 2011, a 9.0 magnitude earthquake struck.¹⁸ The resulting deaths, injuries,

¹² Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Hurricane Sandy FEMA After-Action Report*, July 1, 2013, p. 6. https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/20130726-1923-25045-7442/sandy_fema_aar.pdf (Hereinafter Sandy FEMA After-Action Report) (Downloaded November 8, 2017)

¹³ Sandy FEMA After-Action Report, p. v.

¹⁴ Sandy FEMA After-Action Report, p. 36.

¹⁵ Government Accountability Office, *Emergency Preparedness: Opportunities Exist to Strengthen Interagency Assessments and Accountability for Closing Capability Gaps*, GAO-15-20, December 2014 <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-15-20> (Downloaded November 8, 2017)

¹⁶ Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006, Title VI of Public Law 109-295. <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-109publ295/html/PLAW-109publ295.htm> (Downloaded November 8, 2017)

¹⁷ Federal Emergency Management Agency, *National Response Framework: Third Edition*, June 2016, pp. 7 and 51. <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/117791> (Downloaded November 8, 2017)

¹⁸ Becky Oskin, “Japan Earthquake & Tsunami of 2011: Facts and Information,” LiveScience, September 13, 2017. <https://www.livescience.com/39110-japan-2011-earthquake-tsunami-facts.html> (Downloaded November 8, 2017)

and major damage to buildings, roads, and other infrastructure in Japan was bad enough. But the earthquake triggered a 10 - 40 meter-high Tsunami that struck the coast.

Not only did more than fifteen thousand people perish and hundreds of thousands lose their homes, but things got worse. Several of the nation's reactors suffered damage, and ironically, fell victim to electrical power outages causing a partial nuclear melting and radioactive contamination.

The multiple types of disasters happening concurrently was not something Japan was well prepared to handle. But this cascade of disasters will not prove atypical.

It is time to up our game.

The last two months of U.S. disasters, including four hurricanes occurring within six weeks, stretched, and continues to stretch, our response resources. Preparing for one major disaster is simply not good enough. The nation should assume that multiple disasters within a short time period of a few weeks or days is the new normal. If we don't prepare now for more and larger-scale disasters, we simply will not be ready when they happen.

Congress and the Executive Need to Get to the New Normal

The executive branch has more to do to truly prepare for the new normal of major disasters. Smarter planning, with an eye on larger, more constant and cascading disasters, is a start. There also needs to be tighter cooperation among the federal agencies that respond to disasters.

The cost of getting ready for larger disasters does not have to break the bank. For example, an audit by the GAO put the annual cost of the ten FEMA centers responsible for storing and supplying basic items like bottled water and medical kits at about \$65 million a year, small compared to the cost of disaster response.¹⁹ And the cost of purchasing supplies and equipment in advance is less than purchasing the same during the crisis after the disaster has struck, and when prices are higher and logistics more complicated. FEMA and the disaster response community should consider increasing the quantities of supplies based on lessons learned from recent experience. Further, FEMA should stock additional types of items, such as those that are needed when there are power or mobile-phone outages.

More Money Will Be Spent

Just providing more money will not solve everything, but it's a start, and the recent trend in the cost of disaster recovery efforts tells us that we are not setting aside nearly enough to help the impacted communities. Rather than recognizing that multiple, large disasters are a major risk with a high likelihood each year, Congress does not allocate in advance the amount of money likely to be needed.²⁰ This affects the critical interagency planning and preparations.

¹⁹ Government Accountability Office, *Emergency Management: FEMA Collaborates Effectively with Logistics Partners but Could Strengthen Implementation of Its Capabilities Assessment Tool*, GAO-15-781, September 2015. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/680/672413.pdf> (Downloaded November 8, 2017)

²⁰ The status of the Disaster Relief Fund is updated monthly and describes all expenditures for the year, as well as allocations. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Disaster Relief Fund: Monthly Report as of September 30, 2017*, October 11, 2017. <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/31789>; For a history of the Disaster Relief Fund

And after disasters do strike, even with Members of Congress from the disaster areas understandably pressing for recovery monies, the budget process faces delays, with decisions about how much to allocate for natural disaster relief often put off until days or weeks after they occur. It was 35 days after the most recent hurricane, Hurricane Maria, came and left Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands that Congress passed a \$36.5 billion hurricane relief bill with funding for these and other areas impacted by this hurricane season.²¹

Good stewardship over billions of dollars in spending also demands more consistent oversight resources and attention. Whether it's agency spending for federal employees on the ground, contracting, or assistance and benefits to individuals, the upsurge in spending is at risk for waste and fraud. Auditing and oversight takes resources, and the interagency aspect of disaster response adds complexity. Increases in disaster spending should include new funds for Inspectors General and the GAO to perform their oversight. However, oversight cannot ramp up as quickly as disaster spending, so Congress needs to include oversight budgeting on a regular basis.

The Federal Government Should Address the New Normal *Before* the Next Disasters

Congress, FEMA, and the White House need to address the fact that multiple, catastrophic disasters is the new normal. More realistic budget submissions should reflect the actual cost of recovery, and the need for stronger, smarter preparations.

Despite clear trends, the federal government continues to plan for catastrophic disasters the way it always has—allotting some portion of funds that are never enough, failing to certify the readiness of the infrastructure, and only planning for one major disaster at a time. We can no longer operate this way. The federal government needs to recognize that the increased frequency of hurricanes, rainfalls, fires, droughts, and other disasters is the new normal, and to begin planning for multiple disasters in a given year, sometimes within a short time period of a few weeks or days. American lives depend on it.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to provide our testimony to the Committee. Please do not hesitate to contact me and my colleagues at the Project On Government Oversight if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



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allocations, see Congressional Research Service, *FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund: Overview and Selected Issues*, May 7, 2014. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/homsec/R43537.pdf> (All downloaded November 8, 2017)

²¹ Thomas Kaplan, "Senate Approves \$36.5 billion Aid Package As Hurricane Costs Mount," *The New York Times*, October 24, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/24/us/politics/senate-congress-disaster-aid-hurricanes-fire.html> (Downloaded November 8, 2017)