

Confirmation Hearing Testimony
Jeffrey Byard
Nominee for Administrator, FEMA
United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
June 12, 2019, 2:30 p.m., 342 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Introduction:

Good Afternoon Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Peters, and Members of the Committee. My name is Jeffrey Byard. I would like to begin by thanking Senator Shelby for taking the time to introduce me. As an Alabama native, it is an honor to have you here today and I thank you for your endorsement.

I would also like to thank my wife, Sara, and my daughters, Brooke, Kate, Caroline, and Zoe for their support over the past seventeen years. The life of an emergency manager often requires long hours and extended periods away from home and I could not have been successful in my pursuits without their support.

I am honored to appear before you today as the nominee for the position of Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). I am extremely thankful for the President and Acting Secretary's faith in me as the nominee. As a United States Marine, I have a strong commitment to duty, public service, and integrity. These qualities, coupled with years of experience in emergency management have prepared me for the position for which I am now nominated and, if confirmed, I look forward to tackling the challenges that lay ahead.

I began my emergency management career as an entry level planner with the Alabama Emergency Management Agency where I was promoted through the ranks and held positions spanning the full spectrum of emergency management. I gained valuable experience while working in leadership positions during some of the largest disasters in our Nation's history. I led recovery efforts for the State of Alabama following Hurricane Ivan in 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. After those events, I was the senior career emergency manager for Alabama from 2007-2017. During that ten-year span, I led a great team of professionals in response and recovery operations for Hurricane Gustav in 2008, the H1N1 pandemic outbreak in 2009, Deepwater Horizon in 2010, and the Super Tornado Outbreak in 2011 which caused 238 fatalities as a result of 64 tornadoes in a 24-hour period. During my time with the State of Alabama, I held senior leadership positions for 14 Presidentially declared major disasters and many states of emergency.

Since 2017, I have served as the Associate Administrator for FEMA's Office of Response and Recovery (ORR). In this position, I have been the senior agency official responsible for all matters of disaster response and recovery. While serving in this capacity, I have managed operations in over 100 Presidentially declared disasters and emergencies including the historic hurricane seasons of 2017 and 2018, as well as the unprecedented western wildfires.

The most rewarding part of my experience as Associate Administrator for ORR has been working alongside the men and women of FEMA. FEMA's workforce has time and time again exhibited their tireless and selfless dedication to the service of others and I firmly believe that there is no better workforce in the Federal Government. They truly do not get the credit that they deserve for their unwavering commitment to the mission.

Priorities:

I believe that FEMA's mission of helping people before, during, and after disasters is critical to the national security of the United States. In fact, I believe that helping people is one of the core foundations of government. In 2018, FEMA adopted a new Strategic Plan to help enhance the Nation's levels of preparedness and resilience. This plan is comprised of three major goals: 1. Build a Culture of Preparedness 2. Ready the Nation for Catastrophic Disasters and 3. Reduce the complexity of FEMA. If confirmed, I plan on continuing the implementation of this plan as I believe all three goals will collectively address many of the challenges that face the Agency and the Nation from a preparedness and resilience perspective. If confirmed, I will continue to implement measures that better prepare the Nation and allow it to become more resilient. A key component will be to implement Section 1234 of the Disaster Recovery Reform Act as quickly as possible. This section provides greater funding for mitigation measures before a disaster strikes, making our communities more resilient.

I will continue to focus on addressing resource requirements to rapidly stabilize community lifelines in the wake of any disaster. A key aspect of this requirement is the inclusion of the private sector during emergency response and I will seek to expand on existing efforts in that space.

I am also committed to continuing to reduce the complexity of FEMA's programs, paying close attention to our recovery operations. We must build on efforts to make it easier for communities to rebuild after disasters by streamlining FEMA's Public Assistance program. Recovery should shift from a dollar for dollar, project by project cost reimbursable program to a more flexible and expedient cost estimate direct grant program. This approach will better align the responsibilities of recovery to a locally executed, state managed, and federally supported model.

If confirmed, a top priority of mine will be the overall well-being of our workforce. FEMA currently has staff deployed to some of the Nation's most devastating and complex disasters that stretch the globe, from Saipan to the US Virgin Islands, with several thousand in Puerto Rico alone. Many of these dedicated personnel have been deployed for extended periods of time, some longer than military deployments. The nature of the work, length of deployments, and pressure to perform in these stressful environments can result in negative morale, fatigue, and challenges with overall quality of life. I would like to take a close look at how the agency currently manages these difficulties and seek to ease the burdens that are placed on our workforce. It must be noted that despite these obstacles, 85 percent of FEMA employees understand how their important work fits into the overall mission of the agency.

I believe that a key component for FEMA's success is diversity in our workforce. As an agency, we must be reflective of the communities that we serve, and as such, we must be comprised of individuals from all walks of life. If confirmed, I would like to see the agency do more to encourage recruitment, retention, and promotion of historically underrepresented groups of people within emergency management.

Lastly, if confirmed, developing and fostering relationships with state, local, tribal, and territorial officials will remain an important area of focus for FEMA. Maintaining an open and direct dialogue with these individuals on "blue sky days" is critical to the agency's success during times of crisis. These open lines of communication have been a common practice of mine since my earliest days in the emergency management profession.

Conclusion:

Having the opportunity to serve at both the federal and state levels in various emergency management capacities, I believe that I am uniquely suited to serve as FEMA Administrator. If confirmed, it will be my honor to lead the incredibly dedicated men and women of FEMA. The FEMA Administrator is one of the most challenging and demanding positions in government. If confirmed, I welcome the challenge and I commit to the President, the Acting Secretary, FEMA, this committee, and most importantly the American people that I will work every day for the betterment of emergency management. Thank you for allowing me to appear before you today and I look forward to any questions you may have.