

**Hearing before the Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery and Intergovernmental
Affairs of the
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee**

“2011 Spring Storms: Picking Up the Pieces and Building Back Stronger”

July 19, 2011

2:30 pm

**Chairman Mark Pryor
Opening Statement**

I'd like to welcome our witnesses, fellow Senators, and guests to this hearing. We are here to assess the progress being made in recovering from this spring's devastating tornadoes, storms, and floods. We'll also discuss how to pick up the pieces from these recent disasters and build back better.

The panelists we have convened here today represent some of the States and communities that were the hardest hit by these events. I would like to start by thanking them for taking the time to be here. You all have a lot of tough work on your hands and your efforts and expertise are critically important during this time.

Today's witnesses will provide us with a better understanding of the disasters' impact on communities and economies. We hope to get a better understanding of the collaboration and communication across all levels of government and the private sector, and get insights into how individuals and businesses are picking themselves back up and restoring their communities.

This was an especially tough spring for Arkansans and the fight isn't over yet. There are currently two active disasters in Arkansas, with 60 of the state's 75 counties eligible for Federal assistance. Beginning in April, historic flooding affected over 1000 homes and completely destroyed more than 130. Nineteen people were killed and many are still homeless. Before my constituents got the chance to assess the full scope of the damage, a series of devastating tornadoes tore through two northeast Arkansas counties, killing eight people, damaging and destroying nearly 400 homes, and causing an estimated \$4 million damages.

Unfortunately, the situation I have just described is not unique to Arkansas. FEMA and the President have declared 53 major disasters this year and each one represents the same emotionally-devastating loss of life and property, expensive damages to small businesses and critical infrastructure, and costly disruptions to already-fragile State and local economies.

Recovering from a major disaster is expensive. In these challenging economic times the impact of repetitive disasters threatens the fiscal health of State and local governments. We can't rely on the Federal government to fill the gaps left by insufficient State and local funds. We are all facing tight budgets and difficult spending decisions, and FEMA is not immune to this reality. In addition to a tighter budget for its day to day operations, the scope and frequency of major disasters has led to a projected \$3 billion shortfall in FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund.

In light of these economic realities we must ask ourselves how we can do more with less. How can we improve the efficiency of our response and recovery efforts in the wake of these disasters? Moreover, how can we build back smarter, stronger, more resistant and resilient to future storms, tornadoes, and flooding?

We are all familiar with the facts about mitigation: for every \$1 invested in mitigating risk, \$4 is saved. Mitigation creates safer communities by reducing the loss of life and property while also lessening the financial impact on Federal, State and local governments. Effective mitigation projects such as tornado shelters and safe rooms can also improve evacuations when a community is struck by a disaster.

The concept of mitigation is re-emerging as a result of successful cost-saving preparedness efforts. For example: Arkansas ranks 16th in the nation for tornado risk but ranks 3rd in the nation for tornado deaths and 5th in the nation for tornado injuries. In an effort to address this discrepancy and protect against loss of life in future tornadoes and other disasters, FEMA Hazard Mitigation grant dollars were recently approved for the construction of three large safe rooms in Arkansas schools and communities.

I look forward to hearing from all of today's witnesses about your experiences and lessons learned in recovering from this spring's disasters. I know that some of you have been working on mitigation activities and projects for years, and I am grateful for the expertise you bring to this discussion of how to build back better and stronger. I hope we can continue to follow your examples of how to get more bang for our buck.