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HEARING: “Hurricane Sandy: Getting the Recovery Right and the Value of Mitigation”

WASHINGTON – Today, Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Chairman Tom Carper (D-Del.) convened the hearing, “Hurricane Sandy: Getting the Recovery Right and the Value of Mitigation.” Chairman Carper’s opening statement, as prepared for delivery, follows:

“As you all know, on October 29, 2012, Hurricane Sandy made landfall in the United States. Its impact up and down the east coast was devastating – and heartbreaking. New York, New Jersey, and parts of New England were hit particularly hard. On Staten Island alone at least 21 people died. In Breezy Point, Queens a fire destroyed over 100 homes. In Hoboken, New Jersey more than 1,700 homes were flooded. And I’m sure we all saw pictures of the iconic Casino and Funtown Piers in New Jersey—where so many families spend their summers—broken and pulled into the ocean.

“In Delaware, we did not experience the level of devastation that was inflicted on our neighbors to the north. But our state was hit hard. Widespread flooding caused severe damage to many of our homes and businesses. Roads and bridges were damaged or washed out, hurting commerce and transportation and cutting off access to hospitals, schools, and work.

“The human cost of this storm was severe. I mentioned the lives lost on Staten Island. In total, at least 162 people were killed as a result of Hurricane Sandy. Preliminary estimates of the financial damage the storm caused are approximately \$50 billion. When all is said and done, Sandy is expected to rank as the second-costliest hurricane on record, after Hurricane Katrina.

“It will take years to recover from devastation like this. It’s important that we get that recovery right. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, we saw many problems during the recovery phase that held communities back and created great suffering. Money was not always well spent or coordinated. The recovery moved slowly as a result.

“For instance, millions of dollars were spent providing temporary housing for survivors in travel trailers. People stayed in those trailers far too long because permanent housing solutions were not identified. Rebuilding permanent housing was also complicated because red tape prevented us from making the impact we could have made with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funding that was available.

“The Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006, which was shepherded through this committee and through Congress by Senators Collins and Lieberman, took steps to fix these problems. We’ve seen a lot of improvements as a result. The Act required FEMA to bolster their regional offices in order to build stronger relationships with state, local, and tribal governments. This has not only improved the federal government’s ability to respond to disasters. It has also enhanced FEMA’s capability to support state, local, and tribal governments as they rebuild.

“The law also required FEMA to coordinate with other federal departments to write a national disaster recovery strategy. This eventually led to the National Disaster Recovery Framework, which has helped organize and coordinate recovery efforts to Hurricane Sandy. Although the recovery from Hurricane Sandy is just beginning, we fortunately haven’t yet seen the sort of problems we did after Hurricane Katrina.

“This committee now has a subcommittee with responsibility for FEMA. It’s headed by Chairman Mark Begich and Ranking Member Rand Paul, and I know they will do great work in overseeing FEMA in general and this recovery in particular.

“A key question we need to ask after a storm like this is whether it was an aberration or a harbinger of things to come. Just a few short years ago hurricanes hitting areas along the northernmost half of the east coast were relatively uncommon. Hurricane Sandy is actually the third major hurricane to threaten or strike the northern east coast in the last three years. Hurricane Irene devastated parts of the east coast in 2011. The year before that, Hurricane Earl was major threat. Unfortunately, the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and other vulnerable areas are expected to see more frequent and larger storms like Sandy in the future.

“Additionally, just this year, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) added a new area to its recently updated High Risk List – the impact of climate change on the federal government. GAO explained that, among other things, climate change ‘could threaten coastal areas with rising sea levels, alter agricultural productivity, and increase the intensity and frequency of severe weather events.’ GAO also argued that the federal government is not prepared to deal with the impacts of climate change and recommended that we take a strategic look at them and start to prepare accordingly.

“This is a smart recommendation and it’s essential we put it on our to-do list as a Congress, along with the other items included in GAO’s updated High Risk report. It’s certainly on this committee’s to-do list. The costs associated with responding to and recovering from a hurricane such as Sandy – both the human and the financial costs - are so severe that we simply cannot afford to face this devastation over and over again.

“I’ll point out that, so far in this recovery, we’ve seen states take some promising steps towards addressing the issues GAO has identified. In particular, I am pleased to see that the states of New York and New Jersey have begun to make plans to mitigate against future disasters. We know all too well that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. In fact, a few years ago, the National Institute of Building Sciences issued a report that



concluded that for every dollar spent on various mitigation measures, we can save four dollars in response and recovery costs. Through mitigation, then, we can get better results, save money, and save lives. We must ensure that sound and effective mitigation policies are thoroughly incorporated into this recovery effort.

“This is especially important as climate change drives the sea level to rise and increases the severity and frequency of coastal storms. By working together, we can rebuild—and become stronger by better protecting ourselves from future storms.

“But in doing so, we can’t ignore what I believe and what many experts believe may be the underlying cause of storms like Hurricane Sandy. Finding a way to address climate change is not the topic of this hearing today but, as we recover from this most recent major storm and put into place the protections we need to reduce the impact of the next one, we’d be making a mistake if we didn’t also think about what we need to do address not just the symptoms of climate change, but the core problem itself. I look forward to working with all of you and the Obama Administration on these crucial tasks we have before us.”

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