

Chairman Peters Opening Statement As Prepared for Delivery
Full Committee Hearing: Addressing the Threat of Worsening Natural Disasters
September 29, 2021

Every September, we observe National Preparedness Month, a critical reminder that planning ahead for a natural disaster can help save lives.

Preparedness is becoming more and more important as we continue to see increasingly severe storms and weather events that create life-threatening situations and cause serious damage to our communities.

Driven by climate change, these extreme storms, hurricanes, wildfires, and floods, are becoming more frequent, and more destructive every year.

At the same time, our federal, state, and local emergency responders are also working to address the ongoing public health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a result of these compounding circumstances, our disaster response resources, personnel, and volunteers are stretched thin, making emergency response and recovery more challenging and more expensive.

Severe storms, extreme flooding, and devastating wildfires cost our nation billions of dollars every year. But we can strengthen our disaster response efforts, and save taxpayer dollars, by making smart, forward-looking investments in mitigation before a disaster strikes.

In fact, studies have shown that every \$1 invested in hazard mitigation or prevention saves an average of \$6 in recovery costs for taxpayers.

As we continue to see worsening natural disasters, and the dire consequences they have on our communities, we must take swift action to upgrade our infrastructure and ensure our roads, bridges, homes, and businesses, are resilient enough to withstand increasingly severe weather events.

That is why I worked to pass the STORM Act, which was signed into law earlier this year, to help provide states and local communities with access to the resources they need to make these critical investments.

I was pleased to secure \$500 million in initial funding for the program as part of the Senate-passed bipartisan infrastructure bill and look forward to the House considering that bill soon.

The STORM Act, and this initial funding, will help kick start loan programs in every state to help communities begin to reduce their natural disaster risks.

In addition to creating these kinds of new opportunities to help communities prevent widespread damage, we must also ensure our disaster recovery efforts are working effectively.

Most importantly, we must have enough personnel and volunteers to assist in disaster recovery efforts. Ranking Member Portman and I introduced bipartisan legislation earlier this year that would help the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, ensure that they are able to recruit and retain enough Reservists to quickly respond to emergencies by providing important employment protections. I look forward to continuing to advance this bill so that we can help reduce burdens that make it difficult for FEMA to recruit and retain emergency response personnel.

We have also seen firsthand how our disaster recovery resources do not always reach the communities most in need. Whether they are recovering from a hurricane or other severe weather events or seeking resources related to the COVID-19 pandemic response, too many of our most vulnerable communities do not have equal access to this vital assistance.

Communities of color and other underserved communities often disproportionately face the consequences of disasters, and our disaster response efforts typically provide slow or inadequate relief to those same communities.

Last Congress, I worked on legislation that would begin to strengthen our disaster response for all Americans by creating an office at FEMA that would be focused on ensuring equitable access to disaster assistance. I look forward to continuing that effort to ensure that no matter when or where disaster strikes, help will be readily available.

I appreciate our witnesses for joining us today and look forward to discussing these issues and other efforts that will help us strengthen our disaster preparedness and response efforts across the country.