

Opening Statement for Chairman Ron Johnson
“2017 Hurricane Season: Oversight of the Federal Response”
Tuesday, October 31, 2017

As prepared for delivery:

The 2017 hurricane season brought massive destruction to Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Four storms reached Category 4 or 5, and three of those made landfall on American soil. Our country has not been hit by three storms this strong in any single season in modern history. Hurricane Harvey poured 19 trillion gallons of rain over Texas and Louisiana, leading to some of the worst flooding Texas has ever seen. Hurricane Irma set a record as the most intense storm anywhere on Earth, maintaining wind speeds over 180 mph for 37 hours, and causing significant damage to Puerto Rico and Florida. Hurricane Maria, the strongest storm to hit Puerto Rico since 1928, destroyed property and further decimated the island’s already weakened power grid.

As unprecedented as this year’s storms have been, the federal response has also been unprecedented. More than 47,000 federal employees have deployed to disaster zones to perform rescue and recovery efforts. DHS and DOD rescue teams have saved more than 122,000 people in distress. Congress approved \$51.5 billion in supplemental disaster relief funding to help communities recover and rebuild. The effort is ongoing, and the 2017 hurricane season isn’t over yet.

Prior storms like Katrina and Sandy provided lessons that have been applied to our emergency response strategy. Katrina showed us the challenges of coordination across federal, state, and local agencies. After Sandy, we saw social media taking on a new role in both information dissemination and search and rescue efforts. The devastation of both storms, which took 1,945 lives and cost a combined \$183 billion, reminded us of what is at stake.

No disaster response is perfect. This Committee’s duty is to help our government identify and develop ways to better prepare for and respond to these types of disasters. We must also help ensure that federal resources are directed where they are most needed, with as little waste as possible. Our goal of this hearing is to provide a forum to discuss the facts about the state of preparedness before the storms hit, the impact of the storms, the response, and next steps.

Earlier this month, I went to Puerto Rico to assess the damage caused by Hurricane Maria. My message to the people of Puerto Rico was quite simple: “We are aware of your plight, and you will not be forgotten.” We are committed to helping residents of Puerto Rico recover and rebuild in a way that will enable them to better withstand future storms.

I also want to thank all of the first responders who collectively worked 24 hours, 7 days a week, for weeks on end. Thousands responded from the agencies represented here today, and many others from around the federal government. We appreciate everything they have done—and are doing—to help alleviate suffering and begin the monumental task of rebuilding.

I thank all of our witnesses for appearing today, and I look forward to your testimony.