

Opening Statement for Chairman Ron Johnson
“FEMA: Prioritizing a Culture of Preparedness”
Wednesday, April 11, 2018

As prepared for delivery:

The 2017 hurricanes and wildfires brought widespread destruction to parts of Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and California. Even as we meet today, FEMA’s recovery operations remain ongoing. In total, the federal government responded to 137 federally declared disasters in 2017. They did this with the help of more than 47,000 federal employees deployed to disaster zones to perform rescue and recovery efforts. In total, Department of Homeland Security and Department of Defense rescue teams saved more than 122,000 people from rising floodwaters and raging fires.

Of course no response is perfect, and we must learn from our experiences. In October 2017, this Committee held a hearing to examine lessons learned from the 2017 hurricane season. Today, we use those lessons learned to look forward as FEMA prepares our nation for the disasters that inevitably lie ahead.

I am pleased that Administrator Long has taken the same continuous-improvement approach. He recently released a Strategic Plan that draws from many of the lessons learned during FEMA’s exhaustive 2017 efforts. The plan restores FEMA’s original mission – to supplement state and local response efforts. This shift will require more than a legislative or regulatory solution. It will require a change in culture. With the best of intentions, the emergency management enterprise has become a federal operation. Past policies have failed to incentivize states to take responsibility for their own preparedness. As a result, the average number of annual federal disaster declarations has more than tripled in the last two decades. We must reverse this dangerous trend.

History shows that FEMA’s success in responding to a disaster is directly proportional to how well-prepared the state and local governments are. This culture of readiness must extend down further to households and individuals. We are here today to discuss how FEMA plans to implement a shift towards preparedness and to successfully direct federal resources toward that end.

No American wants to be a victim of a disaster. For those who find themselves in the midst of catastrophe, FEMA and our state and local first responders offer the first sign of help and hope. We thank them for the brave and difficult work that they do. We also look forward to working with them to create a more prepared nation, from the individual household to the federal government.

Administrator Long, I thank you for appearing today, and I look forward to your testimony.