

**Opening Statement**  
**Ranking Member Rob Portman**  
U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY  
& GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS  
“ADDRESSING THE THREAT OF WORSENING NATURAL DISASTERS”  
SEPTEMBER 29, 2021

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this important hearing about the need to address the threat of worsening natural disasters. And thank you to our witnesses for attending.

Natural Disasters are becoming an increasing threat across the country, including some of the largest wildfires, droughts, and hurricanes in history during recent years.

While FEMA is the principle agency that coordinates the federal response to natural disasters, we have a decentralized emergency management system that emphasizes local first responders who are first on the scene when disasters strike.

This is reflected in FEMA’s emergency management strategy that is “federally supported, state managed, and locally executed.”

I have seen firsthand the importance of local preparedness and response in Ohio on numerous occasions over the past few decades when we’ve had flooding, tornados, and other emergencies.

In May of 2019, a series of tornados touched down across Western Ohio, damaging or destroying hundreds of homes and businesses in the Miami Valley and displacing many of my fellow Ohioans. The largest damage occurred in Dayton and the surrounding communities of Trotwood and Beavercreek.

Incredibly, and thanks in large part to the alert systems and training of our local first responders, while 166 people were injured, there was not a single loss of life in the Dayton area that night. We did, sadly, have one casualty from a tornado that touched down further north in Celina.

The next morning, my wife Jane drove from our home near Cincinnati to Dayton so that we could see the damage firsthand, thank our first responders who worked through the night, and to show support for all of those impacted by the tornadoes and storms.

I saw a lot of devastation, downed trees, and property damage. But I also saw impressive work by our local first responders as well as our state and federal partners.

I met with the Montgomery County Sheriff Rob Streck, who had set up a command center near some of the worst damage. I had the opportunity to talk with members of the Central Ohio Strike Team, an urban search and rescue unit from Columbus.

And during my visit, I dropped off some supplies at a Red Cross shelter in Vandalia at Morton Middle School. Less than 12 hours after the event, the Red Cross was already there, providing food, water, and shelter for individuals who had lost their homes.

We spoke with some of the families who said that having this security and a place to stay meant the world to them as they prepared to rebuild from scratch.

Within a few weeks of the event, FEMA had three active centers open across the Miami Valley, with case workers, mental health workers, people that can help with businesses and loans. They also established an area for children to decompress and an area dedicated to helping people with disabilities.

I can assure you: the situation in the Miami Valley would have been much worse but for the preparedness efforts our region and state had in place and the quick response by our first responders.

I'm proud of Southwest Ohio for coming together so quickly to respond and help with the relief efforts. This is a great example of preparedness done right.

It is with great pride that I welcome one of Ohio's leaders in emergency management, Sima [SIM-MAH] Merick, as one of our witnesses today. She has played such a critical role in building a culture of disaster preparedness not just in Ohio but also across the country as the President of the National Emergency Managers Association. In fact, Ms. Merick was leading the Ohio Emergency Management Agency in 2019 and shares credit for the preparedness that saved the lives of so many people when those tornados hit.

I look forward to her and all our witnesses' testimonies today as we discuss the importance of properly preparing for natural disasters.