

**Written Statement of  
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# **2011 Spring Storms: Picking Up the Pieces and Building Back Stronger**



# **FEMA**

**Before the  
U.S. Senate Homeland Security & Government Affairs  
Committee**

**Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery and Intergovernmental  
Affairs**

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## **Introduction**

Good afternoon Chairman Pryor, Ranking Member Paul and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Richard Serino, and I am the Deputy Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). It is an honor to appear before you today on behalf of FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security to discuss the recent severe spring storms.

As you know, many states across the nation have dealt with a disaster of one type or another ranging from wildfires in the West to tornadoes in the South and floods in the Northeast and Midwest. My testimony today will focus on the ongoing response and recovery efforts related to recent severe weather. Specifically, I will discuss how those efforts will provide communities with a solid foundation to rebuild and become stronger, safer, and better prepared to respond to, recover from and mitigate future disasters.

The devastating effects of the recent severe storms continue to serve as a solemn reminder of the importance of maintaining a robust and efficient national emergency management capability. FEMA will continue to support the affected states and the regions throughout the recovery process.

## **A “Whole Community” Approach to Emergency Management**

Our planning and preparedness efforts translate into action through FEMA’s “Whole Community” approach. This approach recognizes that FEMA is only *a part* of the team, and not the entire emergency management team. In order to successfully prevent, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards, we must work with the entire homeland security community and the public. The “Whole Community” includes FEMA and our partners at the federal level; our state, local, tribal and territorial governmental partners; non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like faith-based, volunteer and non-profit groups, the private sector and industry; and most importantly, individuals, families, and communities, who continue to be our greatest assets and the key to our success.

As part of the team, FEMA, as the federal government’s coordinator for disasters and emergencies, focuses our work on supporting our citizens and first responders to ensure resilience to all hazards. In order to fulfill this mission, we must leverage the resources and capabilities of all aspects of the emergency management team, both governmental and non-governmental. As a result, a “Whole Community” framework means thinking about FEMA programs and policies in conjunction with how we work to support other aspects of the emergency management team. I would like to discuss FEMA’s “Whole Community” framework in the context of the recent severe storms, tornadoes and floods.

### *Federal Agency Partners*

Through mission assignments, interagency agreements and advance contracts for commodities, our federal partners bring to the table a great amount of expertise and resources that support disaster-affected communities. These partnerships are essential to FEMA’s ability to carry out

its mission by leveraging the full capacity of the federal government. FEMA responsibilities, strengthened by the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006, have allowed FEMA to develop stronger relationships and pre-scripted mission assignments as we plan in advance of disasters and emergencies.

We continue to work closely with our federal agency partners to help the states affected by the recent severe storms, tornadoes, and floods get back on their feet. One of the ways we do this is through the use of mission assignments. Mission assignments are work orders issued by FEMA to other federal agencies that direct the completion of a specific task and are intended to meet urgent, immediate and short term needs. Mission assignments allow FEMA to quickly request federal partners to provide critical resources, services or expertise. A few recent examples of the specific support these mission assignments have provided include:

- Coordinating with U.S. Northern Command to establish an incident support base in Maxwell, Alabama, enabling FEMA to move supplies (such as water, infant/toddler kits and tarps) closer to the affected areas;
- Activating the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to conduct debris clearance and removal, infrastructure protection, restoration and emergency repair;
- Working with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to help support housing operations under Emergency Support Function #6 - Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Housing, and Human Services; and
- Activating U.S. Environmental Protection Agency personnel to perform the functions of Emergency Support Function #10 – Oil and Hazardous Materials Response, by conducting response efforts relating to oil and other hazardous materials and conducting short- and long-term cleanup.

These are just a few examples of how the federal family works together to support survivors and state and local governments during disasters. We continue to work closely with our federal government partners to leverage the resources they bring to various aspects of our preparedness, response and recovery efforts.

#### *State, Local, Tribal and Territorial Governmental Partners*

Coordination with state, local, tribal and territorial governments is an essential part of our effort to integrate the entire emergency management community. FEMA's leadership comes from diverse backgrounds, but we share on-the-ground experience in state and local emergency management. Our experiences have helped us realize and appreciate the important role that state, local, tribal and territorial governments play in disaster preparedness, response and recovery. FEMA's success is heavily dependent upon our ability to work closely with these entities.

FEMA has been and continues to be in constant contact with the impacted states recovering from the devastating storms, tornadoes and floods of Spring 2011. Our Regional Administrators and Federal Coordinating Officers have been working closely with the affected states to assist them in meeting the unique needs of their residents. Administrator Fugate and I have visited with state and local officials throughout the Southeast, surveying damage and assisting in response and

recovery efforts. Secretary Napolitano also has traveled to the region to view the damage first hand and provide her support. President Obama, in addition to visiting impacted areas, has issued major disaster declarations related to severe storms and tornadoes in the Southeast for the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee. The states of Tennessee, Missouri, Kentucky, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Minnesota have also been granted disaster declarations related to the Mississippi Valley flooding, with the President issuing an Emergency declaration for 22 Louisiana Parishes. There are also major disaster declarations in place in several Midwestern states (Kansas, Indiana, Nebraska) due to flooding, in Alaska, and in Vermont, Massachusetts, and New York. Only a few weeks ago, I visited Minot, North Dakota to review response and recovery operations there, to meet with State and local officials, as well as the FEMA team on the ground.

#### *Engaging Private Citizens & Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)*

We recognize that a government-centric approach to disaster management will not be enough to meet the challenges posed by a catastrophic incident. That is why we must engage entire communities, leveraging voluntary and faith-based organizations, private industry, trade associations and social and fraternal organizations. These are the organizations that provide the bulk of services in their communities every day, and to the extent that they are able, should continue to be the primary provider of such services following a disaster. The quicker these entities are able to get back on their feet, the faster communities as a whole will be able to recover.

We are working closely with NGOs in response and recovery efforts related to the flooding and severe weather events of recent weeks. We will continue to leverage the private sector and NGOs, ensuring that they are fully engaged in all of our efforts.

We also work with the individuals, families and communities who are our nation's 'first' first responders. Our state and local emergency management experience has taught us that, in the event of a disaster, individuals and communities are our greatest resource and the key to our success.

FEMA's Individual Assistance Division helps disaster survivors with housing, crisis counseling, legal services, disaster case management, and unemployment assistance, among other services. In addition to supporting the individuals, families and communities we serve through Individual Assistance, we also work to engage the public as a valuable resource through personal preparedness, citizen and community training, and two-way communication that helps us understand the greatest needs in a disaster environment.

In addition to focusing on personal preparedness, FEMA also relies on the public to look out for friends and neighbors in a disaster. In approximately 95 percent of all emergencies, a survivor or bystander provides the first immediate assistance on the scene. Because family members, neighbors or fellow employees are often the first to provide assistance, it is important that all members of the community have access to the training they need to make a difference during an emergency situation.

## **Specific Partnership with the Agricultural Community**

One of the partnerships I would like to discuss in the context of recent severe weather in the Southeast is FEMA's work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Many of the Senators on this Subcommittee represent states with large agriculture sectors that have been severely impacted by these recent events. As you know, many of the areas impacted by these spring disasters are rural and agricultural lands.

Emergency Support Function #11 (ESF #11) of the National Response Framework deals with Agriculture and Natural Resources, with USDA as the lead coordinator. Specifically, ESF #11 is activated by DHS/FEMA upon notification of a potential or actual incident that requires a coordinated federal response and support to help ensure one or more of the following: the availability and delivery of food products; food safety; appropriate response to an animal or plant disease or pest; the protection of natural and cultural resources and historic properties; and the safety and well-being of household pets.

Administrator Fugate has worked with Secretary Vilsack on numerous issues, most recently regarding the opening of the Morganza Spillway in Louisiana. The Administrator and Secretary issued a joint statement in May that stated that USDA had ruled that Morganza Spillway producers who purchased crop insurance and whose crops have been damaged by the flooding will be eligible for crop insurance indemnities in accordance with the provisions of their crop insurance policies. Secretary Vilsack and Administrator Fugate also spoke after the Secretary's tour of Midwest flooding to discuss Federal assistance that may be available following a Presidential disaster declaration in impacted states.

Since the start of the historic floods that have affected the Mississippi River Basin, USDA and FEMA have been providing updates on the situation and working closely with state and local officials to assist impacted communities and help get people back on their feet. While FEMA is not authorized to provide Public Assistance funds to assist with recovery of land used for agricultural purposes, FEMA is proud to partner with USDA and state and local agencies to provide support and assistance to farming communities damaged by disasters.

## **Transition from Response to Recovery**

Recovery is at the heart of disaster response. FEMA's ability to assist a community in their recovery process depends on our many partners and continues to be based on disaster survivors' needs. Successful recovery depends on all stakeholders having a clear understanding of pre- and post-disaster roles and responsibilities. FEMA is just one part of the team and the success and speed of recovery depends heavily on the whole community's involvement.

Once lifesaving and life sustaining operations have ceased, it is critically important to rapidly restore basic services and community functionality. As part of the National Response Framework, FEMA has recognized that recovery needs to begin immediately following a disaster. During response operations, FEMA will align with other federal agencies, such as

Housing and Urban Development and the Small Business Administration, to begin to scope the recovery challenges.

The length of the recovery phase varies for each individual community and for each individual disaster. Emergency Support Function (ESF) #14 – Long-Term Community Recovery provides a mechanism for coordinating federal support to state, tribal, regional, and local governments, NGOs, and the private sector to enable community recovery from the long-term consequences of extraordinary disasters. ESF #14 accomplishes this by identifying and facilitating the availability and use of sources of recovery funding, and providing technical assistance for community recovery and recovery planning support. Activating this ESF in the earliest stages of response has allowed states, local communities and FEMA to see how the community was structured prior to the incident and enables them to better understand where the community needs to get back to in order to feel “normal” again. Assisting states and communities to take the time and effort to evaluate their recovery options together as a community also encourages a holistic approach to restoration and redevelopment that may enhance opportunities for improving the community’s resilience and economic viability.

As destructive and heart-wrenching as these recent storms have been, they also provide us with an opportunity. In the process of recovering from these storms, these communities have the opportunity to rebuild stronger and safer and become better prepared to respond to future disasters.

### **Rebuilding Stronger, Safer and More Prepared**

In the aftermath of a disaster, the whole community has the opportunity to re-evaluate its functionality and services in order to improve resilience across the full spectrum of all-hazards threats.

For example, under the Public Assistance program, FEMA may provide funds to build certain temporary facilities, such as schools. Following the severe storms in the south, FEMA evaluated and expanded the funding of these temporary facilities to include the construction of safe rooms in schools. This provision allows parents to feel confident that their children are safe while attending school in the event of similar storms.

While communities recover from disasters, we also have a chance for the whole community to come together to discuss how to be more prepared for future disasters. With these thoughts in mind, FEMA hosted a Sustainable Communities Workshop from June 28 – 29, 2011, in Greensburg, Kansas. Greensburg sustained the most severe level of tornado on the “Enhanced Fujita” (EF) scale, i.e., an EF-5 tornado on May 4, 2007, that resulted in more than 90 percent of the structures in the community being severely damaged or destroyed, thereby giving leaders there a unique perspective on the challenges currently facing their counterparts from around the country.

Workshop participants discussed and learned from one another about the recovery process, coordination, management, incorporating sustainability and many other lessons, successes and

challenges experienced by Greensburg, Kansas, Chambers County, Texas and others. Recently impacted communities including Smithville, MS, Cordova, AL and Joplin, MO sent representatives.

Communities in the process of recovery can receive additional assistance on sustainable community approaches to recovery and preparedness through a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) signed by FEMA and EPA in 2010. The MOA will make it easier for the two agencies to work together to help communities become safer, healthier, and more resilient by rebuilding in ways that create long-term economic prosperity, enhance neighborhoods, and protect the environment.

The aftermath of a disaster also allows us to assess the efficacy of our mitigation practices. Shortly following the outbreak of deadly tornadoes in the Southeast, FEMA deployed three Mitigation Assessment Teams (MAT) to impacted areas of AL, MS, TN and GA. Their goals were to: (1) investigate and assess the performance of safe rooms and shelters, and document damages observed; (2) investigate and assess residential building performance, with a focus on newer construction where possible; (3) investigate and assess the performance of critical and essential facilities (e.g., hospitals, schools, emergency operation centers, fire stations, communication towers, etc.); (4) evaluate operational issues resulting from damage of critical facilities (e.g., effect of the damage on response and recovery); and (5) evaluate and provide field evidence to determine the tornado ratings on the EF Scale for those locations where the MAT engineers perform building evaluations.

### **Disaster Mitigation Outside the Response and Recovery Context**

Obviously, we do not and should not wait for disaster to strike before we prepare for a future catastrophic event. FEMA has an active disaster mitigation component that works diligently with a variety of partners from state and local government as well as non-governmental organizations and the private sector both before and after disasters.

Mitigation focuses on breaking the cycle of disaster damage, reconstruction, and repeated damage. Mitigation efforts provide value to the American people by creating safer communities and reducing loss of life and property. These efforts include such activities as:

- Complying with or exceeding National Flood Insurance Program floodplain management regulations.
- Enforcing stringent building codes, flood-proofing requirements, seismic design standards and wind-bracing requirements for new construction or repairing existing buildings.
- Adopting zoning ordinances that steer development away from areas subject to flooding, storm surge or coastal erosion.
- Retrofitting public buildings to withstand hurricane-strength winds or ground shaking.
- Acquiring damaged homes or businesses in flood-prone areas, relocating the structures, and returning the property to open space, wetlands or recreational uses.

- Building community shelters and tornado safe rooms to help protect people in their homes, public buildings and schools in hurricane- and tornado-prone areas.

In this area as in all other areas of emergency management, FEMA is a partner and not the sole provider of mitigation support or assistance. Under the Stafford Act, state, local and tribal governments are required to develop a hazard mitigation plan as a condition for receiving certain types of non-emergency disaster assistance as well as pre-disaster mitigation grants. Mitigation plans form the foundation for a community's long-term strategy to reduce disaster losses and break the cycle of disaster damage, reconstruction, and repeated damage. The planning process creates a framework for risk-based decision making to reduce damages to lives, property, and the economy from future disasters.

FEMA has five Hazard Mitigation Assistance (HMA) grant programs that it can utilize to provide funds to state and local communities to reduce the loss of life and property from future disasters. For example, the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) provides grants to states and local governments to implement long-term hazard mitigation measures after a major disaster declaration. The purpose of HMGP is to reduce the loss of life and property due to natural disasters and to enable mitigation measures to be implemented during the immediate recovery from a disaster. FEMA's Pre-Disaster Mitigation (PDM) Program provides funds to states and communities, including tribal governments, for hazard mitigation planning and implementation of mitigation projects prior to a disaster event. The PDM Program provides applicants with an opportunity to raise risk awareness and reduce disaster losses through cost effective hazard mitigation activities. FEMA's HMA grant programs provide funds to assist States and communities implement measures that reduce or eliminate the long-term risk of flood damage to buildings, manufactured homes, and other structures. These grant programs are part of FEMA's mitigation work and rely upon a strong partnership with our state and local partners.

Mitigation activities can take many forms and vary by region. What does not differ, however, is the value these initiatives can hold. The effectiveness of FEMA's mitigation projects has been repeatedly confirmed, including by two independent studies commissioned by Congress. One study, conducted by the National Institute of Building Sciences in 2005, reported that for every \$1 spent on various mitigation activities, \$4 in response and recovery costs are saved<sup>1</sup>. In September 2007, the Congressional Budget Office evaluated the Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program and found that for every \$1 spent on mitigation projects, losses from future disasters are reduced by \$3.<sup>2</sup> While these studies are valuable and very effective in accurately analyzing facts and figures, the success of mitigation projects are often best seen in pictures of property improvements, and in personal stories of community survival.

One family in Moore, Oklahoma, after being hit with tornados in 1998 and 1999, decided to construct an above ground safe room on the back patio rather than continue to risk riding out the storm in their house. When the warning sirens sounded on May 8, 2003, the family took shelter in the safe room. When they emerged from the shelter, they found the house in shambles with

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<sup>1</sup> Multihazard Mitigation Council, *Natural Hazard Mitigation Saves: An Independent Study to Assess the Future Savings from Mitigation Activities*, 2005

<sup>2</sup> Congressional Budget Office, *Potential Cost Savings from the Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program*, September 2007

the roof ripped off. Other houses on the street were also heavily damaged or destroyed. This family's home was among the more than 300 homes destroyed in the city that day. Whereas a severe tornado hit the city in May of 1999 claiming 44 lives, there were no deaths in the 2003 tornado. The absence of fatalities was attributed to community preparedness, improved early warning systems and the many safe rooms and shelters that have been built. One family member summed up well the benefits of mitigation, stating "The safe room saved my life, it came through with flying colors. It's worth a million bucks to me."

Several families in Joplin, Missouri have credited saferooms with saving their lives. One Joplin family bought a home several years ago that had a saferoom in the garage. They always thought of the saferoom as a large eyesore until the recent storms. The homeowner was home alone when the tornado sirens sounded. He hurried inside the safe room. "Right when I shut the door, put the pin in and sat down in the chair, I could hear my roof leaving," he said. Another family in Joplin built the saferoom into the design of their home that they were constructing, turning the space under the front porch into a safe room. The family of five spent the duration of the storm in the saferoom and all survived unharmed.

In today's difficult economic times, we must make the most of every recovery dollar. FEMA's mitigation programs have allowed the agency to work with its state and local partners to reduce property damage, personal and commercial hardship and long lasting monetary burdens.

## **Conclusion**

FEMA remains committed to working with the whole community to rebuild communities devastated by disaster and working with all communities so they are prepared to respond to future disasters. We also understand that we must adopt a whole community approach to response and recovery in order to be successful. FEMA works hard to ensure that our response and recovery efforts serve to save life and property as well as improve local communities' abilities to respond to and recover from future disasters. We will also continue to work with our state and local partners to undertake mitigation efforts that will reduce disaster losses and break the cycle of disaster damage, reconstruction, and repeated damage. There will be a long road to recovery for many of the communities ravaged by this spring's storms. So, while I am proud of the progress that we have made together, I know that there is still more work to be done. I look forward to working with you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Paul and the other Members of this Subcommittee, as we continue to build our nation's capability to prevent, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am happy to answer any questions the Subcommittee may have.