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CONTACT: Phil Anderson
(202) 315-5100

Former FEMA Director Robert David Paulison Calls On Congress to Establish Blue Ribbon Commission to Examine Rising Costs of Natural Disasters

WASHINGTON, DC – In testimony before the House Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management, former FEMA Director Robert David Paulison called upon lawmakers to take a proactive approach to disaster mitigation in response to the rapidly rising costs associated with disaster relief. Paulison specifically called upon Congress to establish a Blue Ribbon Commission to get to the heart of the problem.

According to Paulison, who is an advisor to the BuildStrong Coalition, natural disaster declarations have spiked from an average of 23 per year, during the Reagan Administration, to 65 per year, during the Obama Administration -- creating exorbitant costs for taxpayers and the economy.

Paulison and the BuildStrong Coalition are encouraging lawmakers to pass a series of bills that would encourage sound building practices and the adoption of model building codes at the state level. The centerpiece of this legislative agenda is the Safe Building Code Incentive Act, which would provide states that adopt strong building codes with additional disaster relief assistance.

Below is the excerpt from Paulison's testimony explaining the rationale for the establishment of the Blue Ribbon Commission. A full copy of his testimony is attached to this press release.

Chairman Barletta, I applaud you for your announcement of a Congressional Roundtable to begin the dialogue on how to identify and quantify the factors driving disaster costs and how to use that information to ultimately study and find solutions.

I know first-hand from my time as director of FEMA that the intentions of those on the front-lines after a disaster are good. But I also believe that we need to step back and take a hard look at our underlying policies.

Even before this we need to understand exactly how much and where we are currently spending taxpayer money. While many independent groups and the General Accountability Office have examined the different causes behind the rise in disaster relief spending, there has never been a comprehensive congressionally mandated panel to analyze what the precise costs are, how much federal spending has been wasted on efforts that aren't vital or appropriate responses to natural disasters, and how best to control disaster relief expenditures going forward.

The new Congress should pass legislation in short order to commission a Blue Ribbon Panel to explore why disaster declarations are at an all-time high, and what is really behind the dramatic increase in disaster spending. Are the increases in spending related to population increases, changes in spending, poor construction of our homes or mistakes in federal policy? Where have federal dollars, dedicated to disaster relief, gone? Do sufficient accountability measures exist for FEMA programs, as well as for related programs administered by the Department of Housing and Transportation, to ensure tax dollars aren't being wasted?

In addition, the panel could explore what changes in policy can be made to enhance building

resiliency, strengthen building codes and reduce disaster costs. The panel could also make recommendations concerning the proper role of federal, state and local governments in solving this problem. Specific attention should be given to the roles of FEMA, HUD and DOT to minimize duplication of effort and waste.

Community Development Block Grants (CDBGs) are sometimes prone to waste. These grants should be closely examined by policymakers before more resources are thrown at the problem. Sometimes CDBGs are not related to the disaster relief itself and are not subject to rigorous cost-benefit analysis. Moreover, CDBGs tend to be more susceptible to reactive forces like politics and emotion, and are not tied to a guiding strategy consistent with national priorities.

Finally, policymakers should assess the current status of the U.S. housing stock, and consider which federal, state and local incentives should be utilized to encourage the implementation of model building codes. Congress should authorize the above-mentioned Blue Ribbon Commission and use the findings to put in place a comprehensive national disaster mitigation strategy that aims to save lives and ultimately reduce taxpayer dollars.

BuildStrong is a coalition of national business and consumer organizations, corporations and emergency management officials dedicated to stronger building codes, in order to protect homes and buildings from the devastation of natural disasters. For a complete list of members and additional information, please visit www.BuildStrongAmerica.com.

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