

**Written Testimony of Robert David Paulison**  
**Former Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency**  
**before the**  
**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Transportation and**  
**Infrastructure**  
**Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and**  
**Emergency Management**

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**2167 Rayburn House Office Building**

## **Introduction**

Chairman Barletta, Ranking Member Carson, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for holding this important hearing today to explore solutions designed to stem rising disaster costs in the United States. The leadership of the Subcommittee and Chairman Shuster on solving this major problem has been invaluable, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share my expertise and assist with your mission.

I have 35 years of experience dealing with natural disasters at the federal, state, and local level. During my career, I served as Administrator of FEMA from 2005 to 2009, Administrator of the U.S. Fire Administration from 2001 to 2005, Director of Preparedness at FEMA from 2003 to 2004, and Fire Chief of the Miami-Dade Fire and Rescue Department from 1992 to 2001. I spent the 21 years prior to that rising through the ranks of the Miami-Dade Fire Department, beginning my career as a rescue firefighter in 1971. In these roles, I have responded to some of the worst natural disasters in our nation's history, including Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. I have a unique appreciation for the tremendous service of our nation's first responders and emergency management officials. I also have a unique understanding of the inherent problems with our nation's disaster preparedness and response system.

In January 2015, I testified before this Subcommittee during a hearing titled, "Rebuilding after the Storm: Lessening Impacts and Speeding Recovery."<sup>i</sup> During the hearing, I urged the subcommittee to launch a thorough assessment of the rising costs of disasters and spark a conversation on strategies to reduce those losses over time. I have been thrilled with the subcommittee's work since my testimony, especially with the many disaster roundtables you have held and the passage of legislation authorizing the first comprehensive assessment of federal disaster policy in over 20 years by the U.S. House of Representatives.

## **Defining the Problem**

The rising frequency and expense associated with natural disasters are well documented. Unfortunately, while post-disaster costs have risen, the balance between pre-disaster mitigation and post-disaster spending remains woefully askew. Decades of research has shown that investments in pre-disaster mitigation have significant advantages over post-disaster spending. However, the federal government continues to allocate only a fraction of its total disaster spending on pre-disaster mitigation. For example, between FY 2011 and 2014, FEMA spent fourteen times more on post-disaster mitigation through the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program than within the Pre-Disaster Mitigation Grant Program<sup>ii</sup>. This statistic does not account for the additional billions the federal government spends through post-disaster programs in other departments and agencies such as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and U.S. Department of Transportation.

### **Government Accountability Office Report**

In July 2015, The Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report titled “Hurricane Sandy: An Investment Strategy Could Help the Federal Government Enhance National Resilience for Future Disasters”<sup>iii</sup> that highlighted the problems with this approach. In the report, the GAO found that the overwhelming focus on mitigation spending during a post-disaster emergency leads to impulsive and reactionary decisions. For instance, a majority of federal disaster programs created in non-FEMA agencies in the wake of disasters were never designed to work together and have resulted in a fragmented system prone to waste and the duplication of efforts. Further, the emergency spending bill Congress passed after Hurricane Sandy appropriated \$50 billion dollars to nineteen federal agencies tasked with implementing over sixty recovery programs. The GAO discovered that the varying and often conflicting regulations and standard operating procedures associated with the different agencies created barriers for those seeking post-disaster assistance. After a disaster, individuals in an affected area often have little to no understanding of grant application processes or eligibility criteria required to secure mitigation assistance. Additionally, many state and local emergency management officials surveyed by the GAO indicated they also had insufficient overall informational resources and had difficulty understanding the varying types of aid available following a disaster.

Another drawback to post-disaster mitigation is the prioritization of immediate survival needs over long term planning. Officials operating in disaster areas are often so overwhelmed by health and life safety issues that they are unable to take full advantage of opportunities to incorporate mitigation into the rebuilding process. Given the post-disaster inefficiencies revealed by the GAO, the skewed emphasis on post-disaster spending is especially troubling. Local, state, and federal officials have all expressed their desire to take a more proactive approach to resilience and hazard prevention. I urge Congress and the next administration to listen to these voices and take steps to reallocate a fraction of the billions we spend on post-disaster assistance for pre-disaster mitigation.

### **National Mitigation Investment Act**

A new approach is needed to correct this spending imbalance. In October 2015, the BuildStrong Coalition, a group of firefighters, architects, emergency managers, contractors and code officials all dedicated to building stronger (and to which I am a senior advisor), released a comprehensive disaster spending reform report. The report highlighted a number of flaws in the way the nation currently approaches disasters and included principles that should constitute the core of a national, comprehensive strategy for investing in mitigation. These principles were designed in part based on GAO’s recommendations that the most effective way to reduce losses is through pre-disaster mitigation and the facilitation of strong building codes through a package of incentives.

Since the release of the report, the Coalition has worked with Reps. Carlos Curbelo, R-Fla., and Albio Sires, D-N.J., to turn the recommended principles into the National Mitigation Investment Act (NMIA) and I applaud Reps. Curbelo and Sires for the introduction of the Act on Tuesday. The NMIA combines two bills designed to incentivize mitigation on a broad scale at the state, local, and individual levels and creates a first-of-its-kind building code enforcement grant program. Specifically, the Act contains:

- The Safe Building Code Incentive Act of 2015, H.R. 1748
- The FEMA Disaster Assistance and Reauthorization Act of 2015 (Title II), H.R. 1471
- A new FEMA 5-Year Pilot Building Code Enforcement Grant Program

The Safe Building Code Incentive Act, originally introduced by Reps. Mario Diaz-Balart, R-Fla., and Sires, is the most widely supported disaster reform legislation in Congress and a central part of the National Mitigation Investment Act. Strong, enforced statewide building codes are the simplest and most effective means of disaster mitigation. The bill would increase the amount of federal monies available to a state under current disaster relief legislation by four percent if that state adopted and enforced nationally recognized building code standards.

Title II of H.R. 1471 was created by Chairman Barletta and commissions a study by the National Advisory Council to evaluate disaster costs and losses. The study would also determine the most effective way to reduce these costs and losses through mitigation. Thanks to your leadership in authoring and championing this provision, Chairman Barletta, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 1471 earlier this year. While I and the BuildStrong Coalition will work to advance the House-passed bill through the Senate in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress, the study contained in H.R. 1471 must be a critical part of any comprehensive strategy for investing in mitigation.

The NMIA would also create a building code grant enforcement program inside FEMA that would provide states and localities federal grants to enforce qualified building codes. In many instances, states have the political will to enact a strong building code but lack the budget resources to pay for a quality inspection and training regime. This grant program would sunset five years after the enactment of the NMIA.

### **FEMA's Disaster Deductible Concept**

FEMA announced in January that it is considering creating a disaster deductible, which would require a predetermined level of financial or other commitment from a recipient, generally a state or local government, before receiving assistance following presidential major disaster declarations. As part of this effort, FEMA is considering allowing recipients to receive credit toward their deductible requirement through proactive pre-event actions such as undertaking mitigation measures, including the adoption of enhanced building codes. This deductible concept

could be an effective way to encourage states and local governments to increase resilience ahead of extreme weather events.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today. Congress has the ability to make meaningful changes to the current disaster mitigation system and I applaud Reps. Curbelo and Sires for their leadership in creating a national strategy for mitigation in the form of the National Mitigation Investment Act. I urge you and your colleagues to support the National Mitigation Investment Act so we can begin to rein in the exploding disaster costs and better protect America's communities. I look forward to working with Chairman Barletta, Ranking Member Carson, and Members of the Subcommittee to accomplish this goal as we transition into a new administration.

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<sup>i</sup> Rebuilding After the Storm: Lessening Impacts and Speeding Recovery: Hearing before Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management, House, 114<sup>th</sup> Cong. 26 (2015) (Testimony of David Paulison).

<sup>ii</sup> United States Government Accountability Office (2015) Hurricane Sandy: An Investment Strategy Could Help the Federal Government Enhance Resilience for Future Disasters. Rep. GAO-15-515. Available online: <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-15-515>

<sup>iii</sup> United States Government Accountability Office (2015) Hurricane Sandy: An Investment Strategy Could Help the Federal Government Enhance Resilience for Future Disasters. Rep. GAO-15-515. Available online: <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-15-515>