

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5051
MINORITY (202) 225-5074

<http://oversight.house.gov>

Opening Statement

Chairman Harley Rouda

Hearing on “Recovery, Resiliency and Readiness—Contending with Natural Disasters in the Wake of Climate Change (Climate Change, Part III)”

Subcommittee on Environment

June 25, 2019

Good afternoon. This hearing is the third in the series of hearings on climate change that the Committee on Oversight and Reform’s Subcommittee on Environment plans to hold this Congress.

After examining the history of the scientific consensus on climate change and the public health effects of climate change in our first two hearings, today the Subcommittee turns to the impact of climate change on natural disasters.

This Subcommittee has three goals today: First, we’re going to illustrate how natural disasters are made both more intense and more frequent due to climate change. Climate change is *real*, and we are constantly reminded of that fact in terrifying ways. Just two weeks ago, it was reported that Greenland lost *two billion tons* of ice on one day alone, which portends a possibly record-breaking season of ice melt this year. Two billion tons of ice lost in a day—and we’ve got people still telling us not to worry, that climate change isn’t a problem.

The American people know better, and they know because they are already suffering from the effects. Michael Mann, a renowned climate scientist, is here today to explain how and why we are seeing more intense hurricanes, more frequent wildfires, and more devastating flooding because of climate change.

Our second goal today is to examine how the federal government could have responded better to the 2017-2018 spate of natural disasters, steps the federal government has taken to address these challenges, as well as explore ongoing recovery challenges—not to point fingers and cast blame, but rather because the best way to improve performance in the future is to implement the lessons from past mistakes.

Third, we are going to assess how well FEMA and other federal agencies, as well as regional and local governments, are prepared for not just the current hurricane and wildfire seasons but also for the

long term, given that climate change is causing more intense and frequent natural disasters. Every single one of us in this room wants FEMA to succeed, and we want to make sure that the agency has the tools *and* makes the changes necessary to do so.

This Subcommittee planned to have the Acting Deputy Administrator of FEMA, Dr. Daniel Kaniewski, testifying here today. This past Friday at 7:00 PM, FEMA informed us that they were uncomfortable with the structure of the witness panel and thus would not be able to make it to the hearing. When Subcommittee staff contacted FEMA on Monday morning to try to work out a solution, we were then informed that Dr. Kaniewski was unable to testify today due to medical reasons. We extend our sympathies to Dr. Kaniewski and wish him a speedy recovery. The Subcommittee plans on having Dr. Kaniewski before this Subcommittee as soon as he is able.

We do not need to look very far to see the personal costs associated with natural disasters in the wake of climate change. A member of this very Subcommittee, Representative Katie Hill, was forced to evacuate her home last year as the Stone Fire ravaged her hometown. She and her husband were able to safely evacuate but, as we know, many were not so lucky. In fact, the past two seasons, 2017 and 2018, were the two deadliest wildfire seasons in US history – with major wildfires across at least 9 states. It's also worth noting that these devastating fires also aggravate the impacts of climate change through their release of large quantities of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into our atmosphere.

Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria hit Houston, the US Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico within just a month of one another in 2017, and the consequences were devastating. You know, we often hear our colleagues on the other side of the aisle tell us that we act like the sky is falling...and in this case, the sky was literally falling. Hurricane Harvey was the wettest storm on record, dumping 33 *trillion* gallons of water on the greater Houston area. Harvey was also the second costliest hurricane on record—second only to 2005's Hurricane Katrina—inflicting approximately \$125 billion in damages.

Irma cost more than \$65 billion and knocked out power for as many as 16 million people. Maria was the deadliest storm in Puerto Rico since 1928, killing over 2,900 Americans and leaving the island without power. Puerto Ricans faced massive food shortages and suicide crisis hotlines in Puerto Rico reported a 246 percent increase in suicide attempts from November 2017 through January 2018, compared with the same time the previous year. Emails from the Department of Defense discuss the discovery of mass graves in areas hit by mudslides. The only hospital on one of the islands was destroyed by Maria, and two years later, it still has not been rebuilt.

I could go on and on about the devastation wreaked by these disasters, and I know that every single person in this room's heart breaks at these stories. Many of us remember feeling the same way in August of 2005, watching the shocking footage of the city of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. That was 14 years ago. I know some of us don't want to believe it, but these record-breaking storms and wildfires keep coming ever more often, ever more powerful.

Responding to natural disasters is a much different beast than it was when FEMA was founded, back in 1979. And one of the reasons why response and recovery has gotten so much more challenging

since then is climate change.

But in March 2018, FEMA removed all references to “climate change” from its four-year strategic plan. This decision is simply baffling. If we all know climate change is happening, surely it should factor into long-term strategic planning. at our nation’s largest and most powerful disaster-response agency? The Trump Administration’s own Fourth National Climate Assessment expects that the intensity of hurricanes, typhoons, wildfires and floods will increase as global warming continues. So we need to face the problem and help FEMA get the support it needs to adjust to this new reality and meet the needs of our fellow Americans.

We have here with us today top emergency management officials from Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands, Houston, Texas and California, and we’re going to let them tell us what they have seen and learned. Almost two years after Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria, and after the first record-breaking wildfire swept across the West, what do their communities look like? How are people faring? What more needs to be done? How can we in Congress help them get the money they need to recover? And how can federal agencies help them not only respond to immediate needs in the aftermath of these disasters, but rebuild their communities to be more resilient, equipping them to better handle the next disaster? Because it is not a question of “if” – it is repeated questions of “when,” “when,” and “when.”

John Donne famously wrote that “no man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” When one part of America suffers, we all do; when people in Houston, or Puerto Rico, or the Virgin Islands or Southern California lose their homes, their loved ones, and their sense of stability and community, we all feel it. And so, I want us to come out of this hearing today with a plan to diminish this suffering. We are dealing with massive stakes here—it is literally a matter of life and death. And at its core, that’s exactly what this series on the effects of climate change is all about—life versus death. The choice is clear, and we’re determined to make the right one.

Thank you very much, and I now invite my colleague, the Subcommittee’s Ranking Member, Mr. Comer, to give a five-minute opening statement.

Contact: Aryele Bradford, Communications Director, (202) 226-5181.