



WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

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ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS: DRRRA IMPLEMENTATION AND FEMA READINESS

**BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS AND EMERGENCY
MANAGEMENT**

COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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WASHINGTON, D.C.**

Chairwoman Titus, Ranking Member Meadows and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on “Disaster Preparedness: DRRRA Implementation and FEMA Readiness.”

My name is James Gore and I am an elected county supervisor in Sonoma County, California. Today, I am representing the National Association of Counties (NACo), where I serve as the Chair of the Resilient Counties Initiative. I also previously chaired NACo’s Community, Economic and Workforce Development Steering Committee, and I serve as a member of our Rural Action Caucus. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to underscore the necessity for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to expedite the implementation of key reforms laid out within the Disaster Recovery Reform Act (DRRA).

NACo works to represent all county governments in the United States, including Alaska’s boroughs and Louisiana’s parishes. Founded in 1935, NACo assists America’s 3,069 counties in pursuing excellence in public service to produce healthy, vibrant, safe and resilient communities.

My work as chair of NACo’s Resilient Counties Initiative helps to strengthen county resiliency by building leadership capacity to identify and manage risk and allow counties to become more flexible and responsive. Through sustainable practices and infrastructure, counties will be better prepared to address these issues in a manner that can minimize the impacts of disasters on local residents and businesses, while helping counties save money.

Counties are on the front lines of defense before and after disasters strike. While state statutes and organizational structures vary, local emergency management responsibilities are most commonly vested in county governments. Following a disaster, local elected officials are often first on the scene, along with our emergency managers, who play a key role in coordinating local emergency management efforts and working to mitigate damage from disasters. Other key county staff involved in pre- and post-disaster efforts include local police, sheriffs, firefighters, 911 call center staff, public health officials and public records and code inspectors. In the aftermath of disasters, we coordinate clean-up, recovery and rebuilding efforts so our residents can return to their lives as quickly as possible.

Furthermore, because counties are major owners of public infrastructure, we are also uniquely positioned to mitigate the impacts of disasters before they occur, so that their impact on our communities and residents’ lives is decreased. Collectively, we own 45 percent of America’s roads, nearly 40 percent of bridges, 960 hospitals, more than 2,500 jails, more than 650 nursing homes and a third of the nation’s airports. We also own and maintain a wide variety of public safety infrastructure, including roadside ditches, flood control channels, stormwater culverts and pipes, Municipal Separate Storm Sewer Systems (MS4) and other infrastructure used to funnel water away from low-lying roads, properties and businesses. We also provide extensive outreach and education to residents on water quality and stormwater impacts prior to and following disasters, and we work to reduce water pollution, adopt setbacks for land use plans and are responsible for water recharge areas, green infrastructure and water conservation programs.

Over the past 20 years, natural and man-made disasters have increased in frequency, severity and cost. On average, 24 percent of counties have experienced at least one disaster in each of the last three years. The past three hurricane and wildfire seasons have included six hurricanes that cost a combined \$330 billion in damages and eight wildfires causing over \$40 billion in damages. Over the last decade, most counties have received a major disaster declaration, with many receiving more than one over that time frame (see Map 1).

In fact, just last year, 570 counties (19 percent of counties) received at least one major disaster declaration. The previous year, 815 (27 percent of counties) counties received a major disaster declaration (see Map 2). Both 2017 and 2018 disasters are eligible for the recovery and mitigation reforms implemented under the DRRRA, and the breadth of counties requiring these resources is evidence that the reforms need timely and efficient implementation.

Counties are not merely stakeholders in this conversation, but a part of the federal-state-local partnership of governments that together share the responsibility of protecting our nation and its residents from disasters. Like the federal government, counties are entrusted by taxpayers to provide a variety of important services to their residents, and we stand ready to work with the federal government to effectively and quickly implement new disaster programs and resources to help our shared communities.

Our experience is similar to many other counties facing disaster across the country. Sonoma County is in the Bay Area of California, 50 miles from San Francisco. It's bordered on the west by the Pacific Ocean and on the east by a coastal mountain range, the Mayacamas, and has a population of roughly 500,000 people. We are the largest producer of wine-grapes in California's Wine Country and we are ranked 32nd overall in the country on agricultural production. The Mediterranean Climate that characterizes Sonoma County also makes it prone to floods in the winter and periods of drought that can sometimes last years. This combination, along with its mountainous terrain make it highly prone to wildfires in the late summers and early fall. Sonoma County is also located on top of several seismic faults, making it vulnerable to severe earthquake damage. When the 1906 earthquake struck San Francisco, Sonoma County experienced significantly more damage per capita than San Francisco.

For example, on October 8, 2017, three wildfires – the Tubbs, Pocket and Nuns Fires – broke out across Sonoma County and could not be contained for more than three weeks due to high winds. Over the course of their burn, the wildfires caused the destruction of over 110,000 acres, the loss of an estimated 6,500 structures and 23 fatalities. Mandatory evacuations were ordered for large portions of the county. At the height of the fires, the county and its non-profit partners operated 37 shelters and serviced over 4,000 individuals. Many of the evacuees were in and out of county shelters multiple times as mandatory evacuations were lifted and then re-engaged.

Importance of Implementing the Disaster Recovery Reform Act

Disaster response, recovery and mitigation starts local and ends local. Counties are currently tackling one of the largest cumulative recovery efforts our nation has ever experienced. **DRRA was passed to improve the resiliency of our nation, which NACo strongly supported, and counties need these reforms to be implemented now to help our communities, residents and economies recover.** By delaying implementation of the critical reforms, we are missing a vital opportunity to put these reforms into practice and aid those working on recovery efforts across the country. We also understand that FEMA has been asked to implement dozens of new programs and reforms without increased staff, and would support additional resources to take on this effort given the critical nature of these changes.

As was noted above, over a quarter of all counties have faced a major disaster in the past two years. This figure only represents disasters rising to the level of federal disaster declarations, and does not include hundreds of other smaller disaster events that can be equally as destabilizing for communities. While state statutes and organizational structures vary, local emergency management responsibilities – including 911 call centers – are most commonly vested in county governments, and counties serve as the main driver for recovery and mitigation following a disaster. Following an incident, local emergency managers and elected officials are often first on the scene and play a key role in mitigating damage and coordination throughout the response, recovery and mitigation efforts for minor incidents and major disasters.

Perhaps the most important reason rapid implementation is necessary is to ensure FEMA headquarters and field staff are aligned on programs and priorities to help communities recover. For example, in 2017, Sonoma County participated in a Private Property Debris Removal (PPDR) program, which was co-managed by FEMA and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Over 3,800 survivors participated in this program with the intention to efficiently remove debris from properties to reduce threats to public health or the environment, as well as providing survivors with a safe, clean lot ready for reconstruction. Approximately two million pounds of debris were removed by thousands of heavy-truck loads moving across the county's network of roads.

The need for clear communication on federal emergency management programs was made clear when Sonoma County received mixed messages on approval through the Public Assistance program during this clean-up effort. The damage to county roads as a result of the PPDR program was discussed with FEMA Region IX on December 1, 2017, at which point Sonoma County was assured that if a damage claim was filed under public assistance with adequate documentation, the county would qualify for road-repair funding. A claim for \$21 million was then submitted in August 2018, but in November 2018, the county received a letter stating that a claim for \$3 million in road damage had been denied. The county then followed up with regional FEMA staff in January 2019 to understand the denial and the status of the remaining \$18 million sum claimed. Regional staff indicated they did not know the reason no determination had been made on the \$18 million, but they committed to sharing the official determination and reasoning with the county. As of today, Sonoma County has not received an official

response on the status of the claim, but we were informed during a May 13, 2019 meeting that this type of claim has not been approved in the past.

In addition to the damage to the roads, Sonoma County put countless hours into documenting and preparing the claims made for this program. Because FEMA headquarters and regional staff were not on the same page, the county may not receive the full claim and could lose the hours of effort put into creating and filing the claim. Given the new decisions required under DRRRA, a timely implementation that is consistently and transparently communicated to regional FEMA offices would help local agencies appropriately plan and prioritize resources.

As Congress and FEMA determine next steps for implementing DRRRA, the following examples help illustrate the urgency with which we need these reforms to be implemented in order boost counties' ability to prepare for and respond to disasters:

1. Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities Program
2. Wildfire Prevention and Expanded Mitigation Activities
3. Guidance on Inundated and Submerged Roads

1. Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities Program

The DRRRA created the National Public Infrastructure Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program (PDMP). This program will provide much needed technical and financial assistance to county governments to support local government efforts to establish and implement consensus-based codes, specifications and standards for community rebuilding. It will also help incorporate hazard-resistant designs and establish minimum acceptable criteria for hazard mitigation project design, construction and maintenance.

As we rebuild from two intense years of disasters, now is the time to operationalize assistance on the ground, where repairs and rebuilding are both needed and already underway in our counties. It is imperative that FEMA expedite project approval and funding obligation to capitalize on the opportunity to rebuild and strengthen our communities – while the opportunity to do so is present. For example, implementing guidance to support hurricane-ravaged communities as they rebuild by using hurricane-resistant design and planning will help mitigate potential losses due to future storms.

Implementation of this program would be extremely beneficial to Sonoma County as it rebuilds. The county has committed to rebuilding its community following the 2017 Sonoma Complex Fires to be more resilient and better than it was before. This program would help facilitate that, but we cannot make progress until FEMA officially implements the provisions set forth in DRRRA.

2. Wildfire Prevention and Expanded Mitigation Activities

DRRA included an expansion of wildfire mitigation measures that are now eligible for FEMA assistance. Whether or not a major disaster is declared, provisions in DRRRA make recipients of Fire Management

Assistance Grants (FMAG) eligible for Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) assistance. We appreciate FEMA's expediency in issuing policy guidance on this provision. However, FEMA has yet to implement the corresponding DRRRA provision that expands wildfire mitigation measures that are eligible for assistance through HMGP. Many counties are eligible for HMGP funding, as referenced in Map 3 (attached).

According to Section 1205 of the bill, recipients may use HMGP assistance for activities that help reduce the risk of future damage, hardship, loss or suffering in any area affected by a wildfire or windstorm. Additional mitigation activities that are eligible for assistance include:

- Mitigation measures involving vegetation,
- Culvert and other drainage system modifications,
- Hardening of electrical transmission or distribution utility pole structures,
- Removal of standing burned trees,
- Reduction of hazardous fuels,
- Establishment of defensible space measures, and
- Replacement of water systems that have been burned and caused contamination.

The California Office of Emergency Services (CalOES) has recommended over 20 HMGP grants be approved by FEMA. Expediting this approval would be extremely helpful in making Sonoma County more resilient. Given that the next wildfire season is quickly approaching, and a major earthquake could strike at any time, FEMA should make these tools available by quickly implementing DRRRA provisions.

3. Guidance on Inundated and Submerged Roads

Under the DRRRA, FEMA, in coordination with the Federal Highway Administration (FHA), must develop and issue guidance regarding inundated and submerged roads damaged or destroyed by a major disaster. The guidance from FEMA and FHA will cover the repair, restoration and replacement of inundated and submerged roads, as well as the associated costs of post-disaster mitigation measures that are eligible for Public Assistance Mitigation funding. This is a particularly large concern for counties, as we own and maintain 46 percent of all public road miles across the country, more than any other level of government. Counties also own 38 percent of the nation's bridges. Given our major stake in public infrastructure, we urge FEMA to quickly and clearly issue guidance on inundated and submerged roads, which is critical to helping counties restore roadways and evacuation routes.

Counties impacted by flooding are currently formulating project worksheets that will govern the repair and rebuilding of submerged county roads. This is a moment of great opportunity: FEMA could issue this new, required guidance as we undertake current large-scale recovery efforts. Implementing DRRRA changes now has the potential to significantly improve the repair and reconstruction of critical county road systems, helping ensure critical routes are resilient against future flooding, thereby improving public safety of counties nationwide.

In February of this year, Sonoma County declared an emergency for flooding along the Russian River, which resulted in a mandatory evacuation of thousands. The river crested at over 45 feet, the highest recorded level since 1995. Damage to Sonoma County roads has been estimated at over \$23 million, including landslides and slip-outs. Without clear guidance from FEMA on how DRRRA implementation, the county is unable to move forward in the most effective, efficient and collaborative manner possible.

Conclusion

Counties are on the front lines of the pre- and post-disaster efforts, and without proper federal assistance, recovery and mitigation efforts may lack the full support necessary to be successful. The reforms offered within the DRRRA signal a willingness to create change within our disaster response network. However, without rapid implementation of those reforms, counties across the country will continue to struggle and bear the financial and emotional burdens of disasters. To that end, we also support additional resources for FEMA to be able to implement these programs in a timely and effective manner.

All disasters start and end at the local level, and counties need federal help to provide proper response and recovery to our residents through implementation of these key reforms.

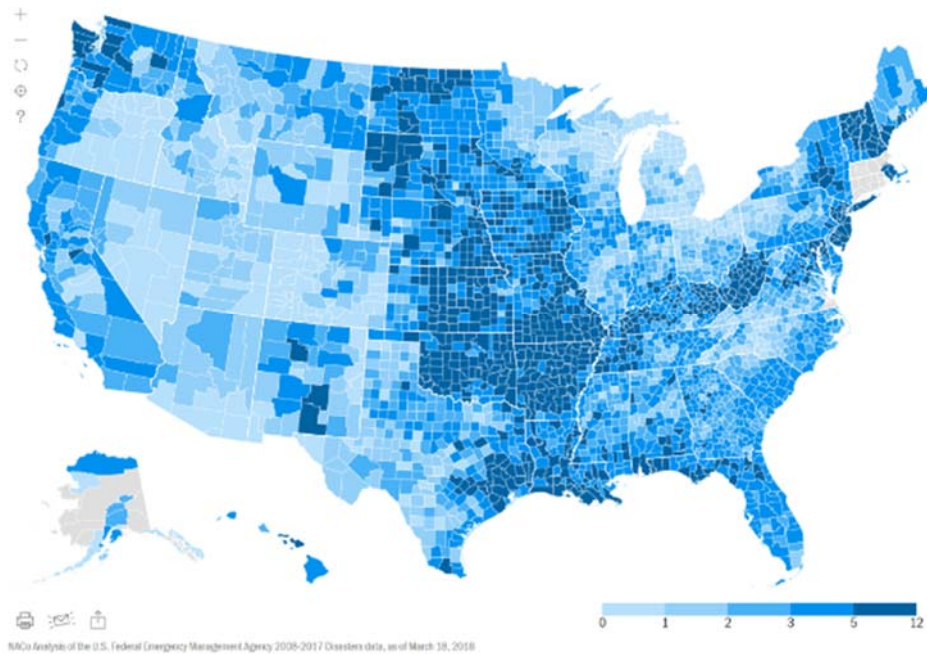
Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I appreciate the Subcommittee's time and look forward to answering your questions.

Attachments:

- **Map 1:** Total Number of Disaster Declarations per County from 2008-2017
- **Map 2:** Total Number of Major Disaster Declarations per County in 2017
- **Map 3:** FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program Eligibility

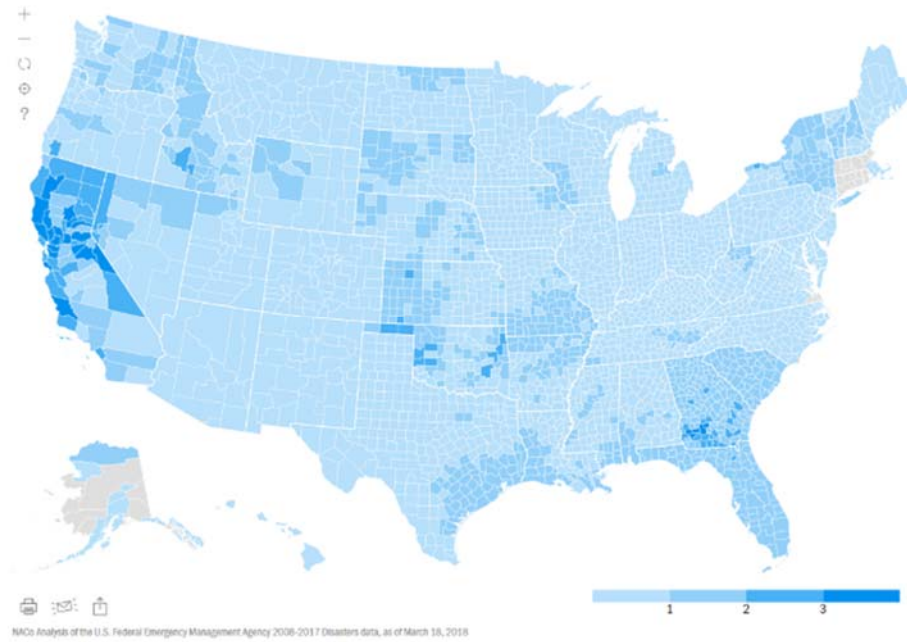
Map 1: Total Number of Disaster Declarations per County from 2008-2017

2008-2017 NUMBER OF MAJOR DISASTER DECLARATIONS - NATURAL DISASTERS



Map 2: Total Number of Major Disaster Declarations per County in 2017

2017 NUMBER OF MAJOR DISASTER DECLARATIONS - NATURAL DISASTERS



Map 3: FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program Eligibility

