

Fixing Emergency Management: Examining Improvements to FEMA's Disaster Response

The U.S. House Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management, July 23, 2025

Chairman Perry: Morning, everybody. The Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management will come to order. The Chair asks unanimous consent that the Chair be authorized to declare a recess at any time during today's hearing without objection.

So ordered.

Chair also asks unanimous consent that members not on the Subcommittee be permitted to sit with the Subcommittee at today's hearing and ask questions without objection.

So ordered.

As a reminder, if members wish to insert a document into the record, please also email it to documentsti@mail.house.gov. With that in mind, the Chair asks unanimous consent to enter into the record letters from NAMIC and the Western Governors Association without objection.

So ordered.

The Chair now recognizes himself for the purposes of an opening statement for five minutes.

I begin by thanking our witness, Mr. Richardson, for being here today to discuss fixing the emergency management system and improving the Federal Emergency Management Agency's or FEMA's disaster response. Earlier this month, devastating flash floods hit Texas, causing a death toll of more than 130 people, including children, from a summer camp. The Coast Guard, FEMA and other federal agencies assisted Texas in the search, rescue and response.

President Trump issued a major disaster declaration opening further federal assistance for disaster victims and to assist in the recovery. My condolences and prayers go to the people who have lost loved ones and to all affected by this disaster. It is unimaginable to those of us who have stood by and watched it.

So far in 2025, there have been 20 disasters, resulting in major disaster declarations across 10 states. This does not account for emergency declarations and all the open disasters still on the books, going all the way back to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. I've said this before, I question the increasing role of the federal government in disasters, but when the federal government responds, it helps no one if assistance is slow, bureaucratic and cumbersome.

States should be the lead in preparing for, mitigating against and responding to disasters. When the federal government does provide assistance, it should be fast, agile and targeted in a way that's most effective. What I believe we can all agree on is this, 20 years from now

in 2045, we do not want to see congressional hearings asking why disasters that happened in 2025 are still open.

The longer it takes for communities to rebuild, no matter who's paying, the higher the costs and the more vulnerable those communities are to additional harm from other hazards. Over the years, Congress has passed reform after reform, trying to fix FEMA and get federal disaster response to work effectively. Quite honestly, little seems to work or have been effective.

Congress passes something intended to fix disaster response, but bureaucrats continue to complicate the law with added regulations. This makes the implementation and process more confusing. At times it seems the process actually gets worse, not better.

The process becomes even more unclear when you add in the numerous federal agencies that are now involved in disaster. The whole point of FEMA was to carry out the president's authority in disasters and manage the entire federal government response. However, we seem to have gotten away from that and we have many agencies, often with conflicting requirements and rules involved, showing the process, slowing the process even more.

Today, I hope we can touch on not just what is happening or happened in Texas and other recent disasters, but how we can work together effectively to fix our emergency management system. Our constituents, American people, are depending on it, it is our duty. How do we make it work better for the communities hit by the disasters and how do we also respect the taxpayer? I appreciate the leadership of the full committee, Chairman Sam Graves and the Ranking Member, Mr. Larsen, for their work in trying to tackle these issues with their legislation and we look forward to seeing that very shortly.

With that, I look forward to hearing from our witness. The Chair now recognizes the Ranking Member, Mr. Stanton, for five minutes in his opening statement.

Stanton: Mr. Chairman, before I begin my testimony, I ask for unanimous consent that the committee observe a moment of silence to honor the 135 lives lost in the Texas floods and to pray for the safe return of those still missing.

Chairman Perry: Without objection, so ordered.

Stanton: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. For the sake of time, I ask unanimous consent to submit for the record news accounts corroborating the details I'm about to provide in my opening statement.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for-

Chairman Perry: Without objection, so ordered.

Stanton: Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing and focusing our mission to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Every Democrat on this panel accepts that challenge and I hope we can work together in a bipartisan way to get this done.

The news out of Texas is heartbreaking. On July 4th, flash floods swept through Kerrville and nearby communities, claiming 135 lives, including 37 children. We have learned the faces and stories of the victims, young girls whose dreams were stolen, camp staff who gave their lives leading children to safety, a father who punched through the window to save his family before bleeding to death from his injuries, and two little sisters swept away together, later found holding hands.

So many grieving neighbors and families on the ground who have been working around the clock in response to this disaster. To those brave women and men, we see you, we thank you, and we will not forget your heroism. Meanwhile, the acting FEMA Administrator David Richardson before us today was missing in action.

For the first 48 hours, the most critical window for search and rescue, he never visited the National Response Coordination Center. For more than a week, he stayed away from Texas, and for 10 days, he made no statement about the tragedy, not a word of sympathy or reassurance to the public. When he appeared finally in Texas on July 12th, it felt like a box-checking exercise to quiet his critics.

He stayed only a few hours. But in his rush, Mr. Richardson failed to check the most important box, basic human decency. This tragedy forces some incredibly hard questions.

Did the FEMA Administrator fulfill his legal duty? Did he fulfill his moral duty? Did the Administrator sitting before us do everything that he could to save lives? The FEMA Administrator is the primary federal coordinator for disaster response. That means anticipating needs, acting proactively, moving resources swiftly, even without waiting for a specific state request. FEMA's own National Response Framework demands proactive search and rescue.

These reforms were put into place after Hurricane Katrina, when federal failures cost lives. Yet nearly 20 years later, history has tragically repeated itself. Secretary Noem required her personal sign-off on every contract above \$100,000.

That bottleneck delayed urban search and rescue teams for more than 72 hours. By the time many urban search and rescue teams reached Texas, no one had been found alive for days, days. On July 5th, less than 24 hours after the tragedy, FEMA's call center contract expired because of this \$100,000 sign-off policy.

The result, the vast majority of calls from survivors went unanswered. Families desperate for shelter and aid were met with silence. Can you imagine losing a family member, losing your home, and having your call go unanswered when you're looking for a lifeline? Yet on July 11th, with over 100 people still missing and search teams still working to find people, President Trump and Secretary Noem called it, quote, the best FEMA response ever, unquote.

All while this administration was working to dismantle FEMA, the very agency whose workers were still risking their lives to save others. According to CNN, FEMA's search and rescue chief resigned in frustration over the Texas response. DHS bureaucratic hurdles cost his team critical time and likely lives.

This committee has a duty to uncover why FEMA failed to meet its obligations and ensure no community ever faces these failures again. So I look forward to the question Mr. Richardson about these stunning breakdowns in leadership and how we fix them. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Chairman Perry: Chair, thanks. The Ranking Member of the Chair now recognizes the Ranking Member of the full committee, Mr. Larsen, for five minutes for his opening statement.

Larsen: Thank you, Subcommittee Chair Perry and Ranking Member Stanton for convening today's hearing on FEMA. The importance of this hearing can't be overstated with the recent tragedy in Texas, as it was a devastating reminder that disaster preparation response is a life or death matter. To quote former FEMA Administrator Pete Gaynor, emergency management is locally executed, state managed, and federally supported.

The system was created so the federal government can step in when local capacity and capability to respond to disasters has been overwhelmed. This is how emergency management has worked since President Carter created FEMA by executive order in 1979. And now the current administration has stated its desire to eliminate FEMA as it exists today and have states lead disaster response, but states already lead disaster response.

That is how disaster response works. Dismantling FEMA does not empower states. It just slashes the federal safety net that serves as a backstop for critical phases of emergency management.

This will not streamline disaster response and will unnecessarily inflate the impact and cost of deadly disasters. And it appears so far that 434 of 435 members in the House of Representatives agree that FEMA should not be eliminated, an outstanding majority for this body. Every congressional hearing on FEMA as well this year has concluded that FEMA should continue.

I expect that this hearing will reach the same conclusion. Despite clear congressional intent, to the contrary, here are just some of the actions the administration has taken to disrupt and dismantle FEMA since taking office. Allowing doge unlawful access to FEMA systems including databases with disaster survivors' private information, directed FEMA to eliminate all climate change related activities and terminology, fired 200 probationary workers and pressured over 2,000 more to quit or accept early retirement packages, halted all FEMA work related to resilient building codes and construction standards, stopped enforcement of the federal flood risk management standard putting taxpayers back on the hook to rebuild infrastructure that is likely to flood again, canceled FEMA's pre-disaster mitigation program known as BRIC, despite clear evidence that these investments in mitigation pay for themselves many times over, ignored statutory deadlines to facilitate FEMA disaster preparedness grants, mandated a wasteful and inefficient manual review of all grant disbursements, freezing over \$100 billion in payments, ordered every grant and contract over \$100,000 to be personally approved by Secretary NOME before disbursement and ended door-to-door canvassing to help survivors register for federal aid after disasters.

Now the culmination of these efforts paint a scary picture, that this country is not ready for disaster season. In 2017, Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Rhea stretched the system. A similar hurricane season this year would break the system.

So after reading your testimony, Mr. Richardson, I'm glad to hear that we both agree that FEMA should exist. That's why I've worked with Chairman Graves to draft the Fixing Emergency Management for Americans Act, or the FEMA Act. Our bill will restore FEMA to being an independent cabinet-level agency, create a new public assistance program that gives incentives to states to prioritize resilience and rebuild quickly, improve FEMA's individual assistance program for disaster survivors by creating a universal application for federal assistance, making it easier for survivors to access resources for basic needs and housing, and restructure FEMA's mitigation programs to make funding accessible with greater speed and reliability.

It does many other things, and it is based on bipartisan work of this committee and has bipartisan proposals from folks on this committee and off of this committee. We'll be introducing the bill this week, after months of painstaking review and incorporation of stakeholder feedback. We're not waiting for a FEMA Review Council.

We don't need to wait for a FEMA Review Council. We've been reviewing FEMA for a long time, and that's why the FEMA Act is getting introduced. So I look forward to moving this legislation through the committee and to the House floor before, and hopefully, having it passed by both houses of Congress and signed into law.

That is the process of making major changes to federal government agencies. Today we're going to have a serious discussion on the current state of the nation's disaster readiness posture, and there will be some tough questions, Mr. Richardson, but please don't think we're asking them because we want you or FEMA to fail. We want you and FEMA to succeed.

We desperately want and need you to succeed so Americans are safe from disasters. So thank you for being here. I look forward to your testimony and yield back.

Chairman Perry: Chair, thanks, the ranking member. The chair now welcomes our witness, Mr. Richardson, and thank you, sir, for being here. Briefly, I'd like to take a moment to explain our lighting system for our witness and for everybody else in the room, in case you're wondering.

There are three lights in front of you. Green means go. Yellow means you're running out of time.

And red means to conclude your remarks. I would also encourage you just to make yourself familiar with where the microphone switch is and have the mic up to your mouth so we can hear you. The chair asks unanimous consent that the witness's full statement be included in the record without objection.

So order the chair also ask unanimous consent that the record of today's hearing remain open until such time as our witness has provided answers to any questions that may be submitted to him in writing without objection. So order the chair also ask unanimous

consent that the record remain open for 15 days for additional comments and information submitted by members or the witness to be included in the record of today's hearing without objection. So ordered.

As your written testimony has been made part of the record, sir, the subcommittee asks that you limit your oral remarks to five minutes. With that, Mr. Richardson, you are recognized for five minutes for your testimony.

David Richardson: Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Stanton, Mr. Larsen, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am the senior official performing the duties of the administrator of FEMA. Before I go on, I'd be remiss if I didn't recognize the tragic loss of life in New Mexico and Texas after the recent flooding. I was on the ground in Kerr County and saw the devastation firsthand.

I'm a father and my heart sank when I heard so many children perished in Texas. My heart goes out to all of those who have lost loved ones. That said, I'm honored to be asked by Secretary Noem to assume my current position at FEMA as we work to implement President Trump's vision of ensuring the American people get immediate, effective, and impartial disaster response and recovery.

The President and the Secretary have called on FEMA to return to its statutory mission and I'm taking steps to do exactly that. Consistent with their guidance, I have conducted a thorough mission analysis of FEMA and directed the agency to focus on three initial operational priorities. Safeguarding the American people, return primacy to the states, and strengthen state, local, tribal, and territorial capability to respond and recover from disasters.

First, FEMA must refocus on survivor-centric response and recovery. FEMA needs to remove cumbersome processes for quicker recovery so Americans return to their homes and communities and rebuild faster. We must find the most innovative and creative methods available to deliver assistance to every American who qualifies for it, while also commuting faster, more clearly, and through more modern means.

Second, FEMA needs to return to a model where disaster response and recovery are locally led and state managed, with federal support available when needed. As the President has said, sometimes FEMA gets in the way. FEMA should never get in the way.

The original intent of FEMA was to help state, local, tribal, and territorial partners build their disaster resilience, response, and recovery capabilities and to provide resources when they are overwhelmed by the scope of the disaster. FEMA has lost sight of its original intent, but under the leadership of the President and the Secretary, we are returning to this mission focus. Moving forward, we will continue to encourage increased state and local investment and ownership of disaster activities.

By doing so, we will be better postured to eliminate processes that create delays, backlogs, and survivor frustration, while also increasing coordination with state and local officials. And third, we must bolster our partners' operational readiness to support our homeland for the

risk of today, as well as the threats of tomorrow. This means returning authority and responsibility to the states in improving our programs and leveraging technology to deliver that support the communities and survivors need when they need it.

The more we build our partners' resilience, the more prepared our nation will be. By emphasizing these operational priorities, we have narrowed FEMA's focus to what it should have been all along, making sure that resources are brought to bear to help communities on their worst day. We are focused on cutting through red tape and ensuring that, when federal assistance is warranted, we deliver assistance to survivors rapidly, regardless of the political affiliation, race, or creed.

But these are just the initial steps. The President has appointed Secretary Noem and Secretary Hegseth to lead the FEMA Review Council, which is conducting a comprehensive review of the agency. The Council is dedicated to reimagining, not just reforming, FEMA.

To that end, I will ensure that FEMA is fully cooperative with the Review Council. We respect the independence of the Council's review and will welcome its recommendations. I am confident that the Council will offer the President actionable recommendations for a more efficient federal disaster response, which is refocused on serving Americans during their darkest days.

Additionally, the President has issued several executive orders to streamline government, and Secretary Noem and I are committed to ensuring that those executive orders are carried out both in letter and spirit. Finally, I am a long-time public servant. I served in the United States Marine Corps as a ground combat officer, leading Marines in deployments to Afghanistan, Iraq, Africa, and FEMA.

Before FEMA, I served as the Assistant Secretary for DHS's Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction twice. As long as I am in this role, I will ensure FEMA remains singularly focused on the core mission. This subcommittee has an important voice in this process of change, and I look forward to working with the committee on the FEMA of tomorrow.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.

Chairman Perry: Chair, thanks to the gentleman for his testimony. We will now turn to questions.

The Chair recognizes himself for five minutes of questioning. Mr. Richardson, last week members received a briefing from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Coast Guard, and the Army Corps of Engineers on the ongoing response to Texas to the Texas floods, and I know we're still in the response mode with over 130 fatalities and 100 people still missing, tragically. However, we do not know when the next disaster is going to happen, and so I know that we're looking for after-action reports, but I think I need to turn to some of the questioning or at least the testimony today, because it countervails what we heard yesterday, or last week, directly from FEMA, from Mr. Turi, when I asked him particularly about response times to the call center.

Now we understand from Mr. Turi that when there's a disaster occurring, that disaster is the one that receives precedence, so you might be getting calls into the call center from across the country, but the ones outside the disaster response area are put kind of behind the ones that are priority, which is the disaster that's occurring now. And in that case, wait times were significantly reduced based on what we're hearing from the ranking member here, and look, we just want to have the correct information. We don't want to say that anybody is distorting the truth, but we've got to make decisions on the correct information.

So the information we got from Mr. Turi countervails what we're hearing right here in the committee today, and so I'm hoping you can elucidate us as to what you know about the call center response time. We also know that people from around the country that call and don't receive an immediate pickup from the call center hang up, but those are still counted as calls into the response center and they're aggregated into the response time. So can you, as well, we also heard that FEMA did not receive a request from the state until Monday, so there was no request prior to Monday for FEMA to get involved in the disaster response recovery effort.

And so I'd like you to elucidate, if you could, any of that information that we received from Mr. Turi last week.

Richardson: So, thank you for your question, Chairman Perry. First to the call center.

So any time that there is a disaster, we surge support to the call center to address those calls, and that's what we did. And so the disaster happened on Friday, and then there was Saturday and Sunday, and for most people, they don't call into the call center over the weekend. They would call in on the Monday, and indeed, we had the surge support available all weekend, and when they came in on Monday, of course, there was a surge.

Now as Mr. Turi very likely told you, all calls were answered within three minutes and no call, or in three minutes, and no calls beyond ten minutes. So it was from three to ten minutes, and the vast majority of phone calls were answered and the questions were addressed. Now regarding the, I think the next part of the question is the support on the ground in Texas on, was it, you said six, you said Monday, correct? Well that's what we understand from Mr. Turi is when FEMA received the request from the state of Texas.

FEMA just doesn't go unrequested, you know, as a federal government, the requirement is to wait for the state to request and then be prepared to respond. So Texas, first of all, on the deck in Texas on the 4th of July, there was a national urban search and request team. We have 28 of those teams all over the country.

One of them is in Texas. So in College Station, Texas, that FEMA funded, FEMA trained, and FEMA equipped asset was already on the deck on 4th of July, and there was also a federal coordinating officer at the EOC, Emergency Operations Center, in Austin, and regarding the request on Monday, that is correct. So the disaster declaration didn't come in until Sunday, and then Monday they requested and the support was there within 24 hours.

Chairman Perry: Within 24 hours. Is there a, is there a standard by which is set for FEMA on the response time? The response time is 24 hours, which seems, from my standpoint, that

seems like a long time to wait. So just tell me if there's a standard, you know, we had a medevac call in Iraq as the commander of the task force.

If the aircraft wasn't airborne within eight minutes of the call, it was a call directly to the Secretary of Defense. What is the response time, if you know, required for FEMA on such a response?

Richardson: Thank you for the question once again. They get there as quickly as possible.

Those two teams came from, I believe it was Tennessee, it was Missouri and Colorado, and they get there as soon as they possibly can, because they've got to move.

Chairman Perry: I understand, but my time has expired, but is there a minimum response time, I'm just asking for purposes of trying to make things better, so does FEMA have a minimum response time once the request is made to respond, like within an hour or within 24 hours?

Richardson: Well, they respond immediately, and as soon as they get the word, they move. So they respond immediately.

Chairman Perry: But there's no requirement that you know of? There's no requirement?

Richardson: They get there as fast as possible. I don't know if there's an hour number, but they get there as fast as possible.

Chairman Perry: If you could get back to the committee with that information, that would be helpful with that. My time has expired, and the chair now recognizes the ranking member, Mr. Representative Stanton from Arizona.

Rep. Stanton (Arizona): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, I too was at the briefing that you were at, and it sounds like you and I share our disappointment in FEMA staff for pointing the finger at Governor Abbott and blaming Governor Abbott and his team for a late request for urban search and rescue help in this horrible disaster. But as Mr. Richardson, I'm sure, knows, under federal law, under the National Response Framework, FEMA does not wait for a request from the local government.

And under the National Response Framework, federal law requires FEMA to anticipate the needs of states in disasters, to coordinate proactively, and not to wait on the state's request for positioning resources. Mr. Richardson, were you aware that this is federal law for you to act proactively and not to wait for a request from Governor Abbott to pre-position resources?

Richardson: Thank you for the question, Mr. Stanton. The capability, indeed, was pre-positioned, and that's why I mentioned Texas Task Force 1. It was pre-positioned in Texas and ready to go.

Once again, that's a federally trained, federally equipped, and they were-

Stanton: Mr. Richardson, I've got to cut you off because I have a short bit of time. You need to talk to your staff, because your staff was pointing the finger at Governor Abbott and say the lack of urban search and rescue proactivity was based upon a late request from the governor's office. My belief, and it sounds like your belief, is that the requirement for you as the FEMA administrator is to anticipate, in light of the weather reports and how bad it was going to be, was to pre-position those urban search and rescue folks in advance.

And I believe that FEMA has failed in that mission, because there could have been a lot more urban search and rescue there later. They weren't there until 72 hours after the tragic incident. How many times have you met with President Trump since you've assumed this role?

Richardson: I have not met with President Trump.

Stanton: How many times have you spoken with President Trump one-on-one in your current capacity?

Richardson: I correspond with the President on a regular basis.

Stanton: Where were you on July 4th and July 5th of this year?

Richardson: On July 4th, I was on vacation.

Stanton: When did you return from your vacation?

Richardson: I returned the next day.

Stanton: So on July 5th, you returned to Washington, D.C.?

Richardson: I spent the entire vacation in my vehicle, speaking on my phone to either the state of Texas or DHS, coordinating for the events in Texas.

Stanton: Were you on the first plane back to Washington then from your vacation?

Richardson: I was in my truck with my two boys and myself. I was in my truck and remained in my truck the whole time.

Stanton: When did you first learn of Secretary Noem's \$100,000 sign-off policy and did you warn her or anyone at DHS about the potential for delays in FEMA's ability to respond as a result of that policy?

Richardson: The Secretary signs anything that comes across her desk nearly immediately without undue delay. I never had a concern about the \$100,000 memo. Never concerned me.

I've never seen it cause any undue delay.

Stanton: The \$100,000 sign-off policy did not delay your ability to proactively put forward resources, urban search and rescue resources, in place as soon as you knew about how bad the flood was.

Richardson: Under President Trump's leadership and Secretary Noem's leadership, their exceptional leadership, the support that was so critical to the people and the state of Texas on their worst day was on target, on time and that is what they told me.

That's what the President said. That's what the Secretary said. Texas got what they needed when they needed it.

Stanton: So your lack of visibility in the hours and days and even week after this horrific flood that cost so many lives is shocking. Secretary Noem was very present. You were not.

Did President Trump, Secretary Noem or any official at the White House direct you to stand down during this crisis?

Richardson: I was in constant communication with the state of Texas, DHS and the White House handling the disaster immediately when I found out and I'll remain so for the entire time. Constant communication with the state of the emergency manager in the state of Texas, Nim Kidd, as well as Region 6, as well as communication with the White House and Secretary Noem. I was on full duty, full time.

Stanton: Mr. Richardson, you were nowhere near Texas at the critical moments in the search and rescue and you did not even show your face for more than a week after the flood. You are the administrator of this critical agency. You're the leader, but you did not lead as you are required to by federal law.

But worse, you seem uninterested to learn what went wrong and how to respond better. Do the victims and survivors in Texas deserve an apology?

Richardson: What happened in Texas was an absolute tragedy. It's hard to fathom.

I went to Texas. I flew over. It was an absolute tragedy.

My heart goes out to the people in Texas.

Stanton: That was intended as a yes or no question and I'll appropriately take that as a no. Mr. Chairman, this wasn't just incompetence.

It wasn't just indifference. It was both. And that deadly combination likely cost lives.

I yield back.

Chairman Perry: The gentleman's time has expired. The chair now recognizes Representative Ezell from Mississippi.

Rep. Ezell (Mississippi): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you, Mr. Rich, for being here. And thank you for meeting with me earlier last week.

We discussed numerous FEMA issues the other day. For years, the agency has struggled to respond effectively to disasters, both before and after they occur. A couple months ago, one of the county managers from North Carolina testified before this subcommittee and reflected on the fact that FEMA did not even pick up the phone when tragedy struck.

Within my own district, as we've discussed projects, they're still lingering after Katrina. We're coming up on the 20th anniversary next month, 20 years after the deadly hurricane, my office is still battling with FEMA over issues from that hurricane. Mr. Rich, in what measures is FEMA taking to finally close out the Katrina projects?

Richardson: There's a great emphasis on closing out the FEMA projects.

It's one of my discoveries during the full mission analysis at FEMA that we have a long ways to go on closing out all the open disasters. In fact, just this morning, I was briefed on the open disasters. And that's one of the challenges we find with FEMA, that there's too many bureaucratic processes in the place for closing out the disasters.

Ezell: You're gonna work on cutting out some of those bureaucratic issues?

Richardson: Indeed, I am, sir, and I would be glad to collaborate with you, come see you, and talk you through how we're doing that.

Ezell: Thank you. Kind of switching gears here just a minute.

Last Congress, I asked Administrator Criswell to consider the flood map provided by locals in my state. I am encouraged by the positive feedback from that. And I want to continue on with conversations about that between FEMA and the stakeholders in Mississippi.

A more informed consumer base armed with clear signals about their flood risk would lead to a better insurance, participation, stronger risk pools, and encourage floods mitigation, investments that reduce flood insurance premiums, and help the taxpayer. How is FEMA modernizing NFIP to meet the need for property level risk flood management?

Richardson: So, national flood insurance is a challenge. The floods are the most damaging disaster that we have.

And that's what, that costs billions of dollars a year. So, what I can say is that we are looking at ways to modernize. And I don't want to get ahead of the FEMA Council, because I know that the FEMA Council is also looking at ways to modernize the flood insurance program, so that we can all benefit from it.

Right now, as I mentioned, it's very expensive, but we always pay out the premiums at FEMA.

Ezell: Thank you. Mr. Richardson, many states depend on preparedness grants for approaching disasters.

Currently, we are in hurricane season, as you well know, and these grants are vital for preparation and mitigation. Mr. Chairman, I would request to submit for the record a letter from Representative Davidson and Representative Lansman to Secretary Noem and Mr. Richardson. Without objection, so ordered.

Mr. Richardson, can we expect the notices of funding opportunities for FY 25 grants to be released? They're currently 68 days behind their past due date.

Richardson: I have good news. As we speak, notice of fundings are going out the door.

Ezell: Great. Well, that's really good news. Lastly, Mr. Richardson, have you been able to read through the bipartisan work product the committee has introduced on FEMA reform? And what's your opinion of the reform draft?

Richardson: Indeed, I have.

Can you repeat the last part of the question?

Ezell: You know, have you been able to read through the reform we've asked? And can you give us your opinion about the draft?

Richardson: So I read through the draft, and because I've done my own thorough mission analysis at FEMA, I'm pretty familiar with the language in your draft. And there was a couple of things I saw. And although it didn't address mission creep necessarily, what I did see was that it was restricted to the statutory missions of FEMA, which is good.

Because what I discovered during the mission analysis, there's a lot of mission creep. A couple other things I saw in there, there was a large emphasis on coordination. I think part of the mission creep at FEMA is that there's boots on the ground where we should be doing more coordination.

I do believe I saw something in there on continuity, which is outstanding. And then I think there could be better survivor interface. And that's also something that was in the draft language.

Ezell: Thank you, sir, and I appreciate you being here today. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman Perry: Chair, thanks.

The gentleman the chair now recognizes the ranking member of the full committee, Representative Larsen from Washington.

Rep. Larsen (Washington): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Richardson, your testimony says that you've been asked to, quote, return FEMA to its statutory mission.

You've mentioned that a couple of times. So I have a list here compiled by the Congressional Research Service of the 518 actions that the law mandates FEMA needs to do. And currently, FEMA doesn't follow all these laws.

It's 518 statutory missions. And this is kind of a crazy question, but can you commit today that you'll fulfill the promise in your testimony to return FEMA to its statutory mission and implement all the mandates in this list?

Richardson: So the answer is, we did our own mission analysis at FEMA, which comes up with not far from the statutory tasks that you have there. And what we did, and I can commit to, is that we developed eight mission essential tasks that we have to do by statute.

We've only done the initial analysis, but all I can commit to is we, until otherwise directed, we'll continue to carry out the mission essential tasks for the federal emergency.

Larsen: Well, I think it's fair to say that there'd be probably eight categories of missions. I don't think FEMA only does eight things.

And I think that what these 518 actions that are in law says FEMA has to do, that are your mandates, are worth going over. So I want to be sure we enter this in the record, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, I'll take care of it.

The next thing I want to ask is, you noted that the original-

Chairman Perry: Without objection, sir.

Larsen: Your testimony says the original intent of FEMA was to help state, local, tribal, and territorial partners build their disaster resilience. And that FEMA, quote, must bolster our partners' operational readiness to support our homeland for the risks of today and threats of tomorrow.

Here's the thing. There are three really kind of basic three missions of FEMA. Pre-disaster mitigation, immediate response, and recovery.

It sounds to me like the administration really wants to do response and recovery and leave sort of the preparation to lower the damage from disasters, leave that to state and local governments. That is the pre-disaster mitigation bit, which is why the administration canceled billions of dollars in BRIC money, Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities money, and pulled that back. But it does seem that you aren't helping communities prepare for their worst day if we are not helping them, if we're not including in the recovery bit, the ability to build for that worst day, so the impact of the worst day is less than it could have been.

And that is pre-disaster mitigation assistance. I'm thinking specifically of a lot of things in my state, one in particular, the \$85 million grant that was four years in the making for the county of Grays Harbor. I can get the details on it.

But this is not a county that is going to find \$85 million in the couch cushions to be able to do that work. And there are places all over the country that need federal assistance for pre-disaster mitigation in order to prepare for the likelihood that something's coming in the future. Could be floods in my area, could be earthquakes in my area, could be wildfires and so on.

But the administration is sort of saying, states and locals need to do that when they don't have the money to do that. We're the backstop. We need to be helping states and locals prepare for this and paying for this with appropriate review so that the disaster we respond to is less than it could have been.

And so, I mean, do you think that FEMA has no responsibility to help local governments and state governments prepare for that worst day? Because that's what it sounds like.

Richardson: What I think is that, I believe you're referring to mitigation, correct? What I believe and what FEMA believes is mitigation is very important. And I think you know what the return on investment for mitigation is.

It's like, yeah, 7 to 1 or 6 to 1, I don't really remember. However, under Secretary Noem's outstanding leadership, as well as the president's outstanding leadership, what FEMA is responsible to ensure there is proper oversight of the grant funding for mitigation.

Larsen: Here's the point, and I appreciate that.

I don't think their leadership's been outstanding on that, and that's my job to be critical and to be complimentary when both circumstances avail themselves to that. But on pre-disaster mitigation, on helping communities prepare, I don't think they've done outstanding leadership. They've actually cut the money to zero to help our state and local governments prepare for that worst day.

So the worst day is less than it would have been. And we may not have been specific in the FEMA Act to include that. We're looking at changes to make as part of the FEMA Act.

It doesn't mean we're against disaster mitigation assistance, because we already have that. What you're all choosing to do is to not do what you can do. Now, the law doesn't say you have to fund the BRIC program.

It authorizes you to fund the BRIC program, DRF. But not funding the BRIC program is actually making the worst day, the actual worst, really the worst day, as opposed to investing in ensuring the worst day is less than it could have been. I just really got to hit home on that, and really going to push hard on you all, the administration, so that their leadership can be outstanding.

I want it to be outstanding. I don't think it is right now. Now I yield back.

Chairman Perry: Gentleman's time has expired. The chair now recognizes Representative Kennedy.

Rep. Kennedy (Utah): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Richardson, for being here. I wanted to start off with a disaster that's unfolding in the state of Utah right now, a fire that currently is the Deer Creek fire has burned more than 17,000 acres, and we have over 585 firefighters and personnel on the line

right now in the state of Utah. There's helicopters, dozers, and engines that are backing up these individuals trying to help with that.

But I want to recognize their courage and thank FEMA for stepping in to help early with a fire management assistant grant. That's really important to us, and that federal support actually can make all the difference as we deal with the wildfires, not only in the state of Utah, but throughout the West. That said, serious challenges remain.

In 2024, Utah expected to spend \$12 million on wildfire suppression, and instead, we spent \$28 million by late August, and FMAG reimbursements from previous fire seasons are still delayed for us, leaving the state to front the costs. Thanks to your leadership and the Utah State Legislature, we're now operating with a unified wildfire suppression fund that supports prevention and post-fire recovery. It's a forward-looking state-led model that gives Utah the flexibility to act quickly and invest wisely.

Utah needs federal partners to help us move faster, not slow us down in these circumstances. I have a few questions regarding that. So the first question is, working with the Utah Legislature, we've got this wildfire suppression fund that is designed to manage all phases before, during, and after the fire.

How is FEMA supporting that kind of state-led model, especially for major incidents like the Deer Creek fire and smaller fires like Amelia and Wright Draw?

Richardson: Thank you for your question. So the way we manage that is not only through FEMA, but also through the FEMA, the regional administrator, and they work very closely with the states on those issues. I am very aware, my heart goes out to the people of Nevada of the fires.

I get briefed on that nearly every day, so I see them. And so that's kind of how we handle that, normally at the regional level. And the regional managers, they'll contact me, we're in close communication, and we work through any issues that happen.

But no, that generally happens at the regional level, which is how it should be, because that is the closest to the state.

Kennedy: Good, thank you very much for that. As to these reimbursements, the assistance grants reimbursements, Utah's still waiting for FMAG payments from past fire seasons.

What is FEMA doing to speed that up, to help these states that have spent a lot of money to suppress these wildfires, often that are on federal lands?

Richardson: So you're asking me how we're speeding up the FMAG process?

Kennedy: How do we speed up the FMAG process?

Richardson: So I'm not real familiar with exactly how we do the FMAG, but what I'd like to do is go back to my office and see exactly how it's done, and then we'll bring to you some recommendations.

Kennedy: Yeah, and anything we can do to help with that, with recommendations on your part or our part, the reality is this is in the state, but the federal lands are often implicated, which leads me to my final question. If I have any time remaining, I'll yield that to my chair.

But the Deer Creek Fire currently is crossing county and state lines, as well as tribal lands. And what systems is FEMA using to support real-time coordination as we deal with various jurisdictions associated with these fires, which don't respect boundaries?

Richardson: So are you asking me what technology we're using?

Kennedy: Technology or methods that we'll use as these fires cross various jurisdictions, including state lines, county lines, and tribal lands.

Richardson: Well, once again, I'm going to have to get back with my staff, and I'll circle back with you.

Kennedy: Please do, thank you. I don't know the exact answer to that. Mr. Chair, I'll yield time to you if I've got about a minute left. So please.

Chairman Perry: Sure, thanks, gentlemen. Mr. Richardson, in previous questioning, it was implied that FEMA is, I think, uncaring.

And many of us on either side of the aisle here have certainly plenty of, I think, justified criticism of FEMA. But in regard to the Texas fire, or Texas flood, and the search and rescue effort, it's my understanding in the briefing last week that the governor requested the Coast Guard, indeed close by, one unit located in Houston, neither unit could get to the site of the flooding and actually do search and rescue or recovery operations due to weather. And as a matter of fact, one of the members of the Coast Guard had been highly decorated for his actions on the ground there.

Can you, look, like I said, we just want to make sure that we level set here and we understand what happened, what FEMA's role was, what FEMA was prepared for, but what was actually used by the governor. If FEMA was stationed on site, but the governor didn't want FEMA there because he wanted to use the Coast Guard because of a preexisting relationship or because of capability or location, that's important to know now. Can you provide or shed any light on that issue?

Richardson: Definitely, and thank you for the question.

So let's back up. So from the second that I found out about the horrible disaster in Texas, what I was doing was coordinating, okay? From where I was, I was coordinating to ensure that these assets were being applied to the disaster. Now, Texas Task Force One, which is a FEMA paid for and equipped asset, was working also with the emergency state manager, but they also have a direct relationship with the Coast Guard, CBP, Public Health, and the Texas National Guard.

So there were other forces on the ground that were either federal forces like Texas Task Force One, which is a national, and then there was also other DHS assets. And through Secretary Noem's extraordinary leadership, my coordination, we made sure they were available to the emergency operations center.

Chairman Perry: Appreciate the answer.

The time of the gentleman has long expired, and I want to respect everybody on the committee. The chair now recognizes the delegate from Washington, D.C., Ms. Norton. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Rep. Norton (DC): Mr. Richardson, the Potomac River is the only source of drinking water for the nation's capital. Which I represent. The Army Corps of Engineers produces the drinking water for the nation's capital, and the Army Corps only has one day of backup water supply.

This poses a significant risk to the residents of the nation's capital, the operations of the federal government, national security, and regional economy. What steps, if any, has the Federal Emergency Management Agency taken to prepare for the possibility that the Potomac River could become unusable for drinking water at any moment, whether through man-made or natural events?

Richardson: Ms. Norton, thank you for your question. And the first time this came to my attention was yesterday afternoon.

And before I left the office, I asked my staff, I said, we need to get together information so that I can go sit down with Ms. Norton and walk through this, and we need to know all the issues. So if you would allow me to come and talk you through this and figure out how we're going to address this, I would appreciate it.

Norton: Very much, I'd appreciate your coming.

Do you believe that human activity, particularly the burning of fossil fuels, is the primary cause of climate change?

Richardson: Thank you for the question, Ms. Norton. What I believe is, I'm sitting in the chair of the FEMA administration when I believe that we will address disasters regardless of their origin.

Norton: Well, do you believe that the frequency and severity of natural disasters in the United States are increasing?

Richardson: What I believe is, regardless of whether they're increasing or not, that the FEMA is there to assist the American public, the nation in disaster response and recover, regardless of the origin or regardless of the frequency.

Norton: Thank you very much, and I yield back.

Chairman Perry: Chair, thanks to the gentlewoman. Chair now recognizes the gentleman from Texas, Representative Babin.

Rep. Babin (Texas): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it. And also thank you, Administrator Richardson, not only for being here, but also for your service as a Marine.

Thank you so much. The tragic events that took place during the flood in the heart of the Texas Hill Country has shaken us all very, very deeply. But for me and many families in my district, this hit pretty close to home.

The Hill Country is home to Camp Mystic, Camp Stewart, Camp Baltimore, Heart of the Hills, many other ones, cherished summer camps. The children at these camps were heavily impacted by the flooding. My family's connection to these camps spans generations.

As a matter of fact, my father-in-law, my brother-in-law, were there in the 30s and 60s. I was a teenage counselor myself in the 60s. My own granddaughter had just returned from Camp Mystic's first term earlier this summer.

And another one of my granddaughters was planning on attending Camp Mystic as well in the second term. But unfortunately, or should I say fortunately, she had a torn meniscus and we had to cancel. I've had four grandsons attend Camp Stewart just a few miles down the road.

And there are so many more people not related necessarily by blood, but who feel like camp family to me. It was a cultural thing that went for many, many generations. The entire state mourns the loss of longtime camp director Jane Ragsdale, a woman who poured her heart into shaping generations of young lives, including my own daughters and granddaughters.

No words can really truly capture the grief and heartbreak that so many of us feel, but we owe it to these families and future generations to ensure that this never happens again. We must learn everything we can from this tragedy. We must act.

And that's why the House Science Committee, which I chair, will be conducting a thorough review of the circumstances surrounding this event. And it's also why reauthorization of the Weather Act must prioritize improving weather communication, strengthening coordination with local officials and accelerating technological innovation. Communities must have every single advantage when severe weather hits.

NOAA and the National Weather Service must be equipped to fulfill their core mission, protecting life and property. National Weather Service has been found to have done their job. They were not understaffed.

The truth of the matter is they did what they needed to do. Administrator Richardson, as you know, heavy rains and flash floods are not uncommon in Texas, especially in my own district over on the east side of the state where we've had seven disaster declarations in 10 years. But the scale and suddenness of this particular event in Kerr County, Texas demand urgent attention.

And here on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee where we work closely with FEMA on long-term planning and disaster mitigation, I look forward to working with you and your team to identify gaps, streamline interagency communications and support smart data-driven solutions, whether it's investing in flood mapping, modernizing warning systems or expanding public education, we've got to work together to prevent another tragedy. This flood has changed lives forever. We owe it to every single family, camper, counselor, first responder to make sure that their pain leads to progress.

I've got a little time left. So I want to ask you, I have a question. What steps will FEMA take to ensure that something like this will never happen again? And how can we in Congress support your efforts to strengthen preparedness and response capabilities?

Richardson: Thank you for your question.

Yes, sir. So once again, the events in Texas, the tragic, I mean, we've all heard descriptions of it, seen descriptions of it was absolutely horrible. And our hearts go out to the great state of Texas and all the people.

I've got two boys and I just, when I flew over Guadalupe River and saw Camp Mystic, my heart, which we had already sank, sunk further. So, and this is how we're going to work this. This is locally led, state managed and federally supported.

So what we do is we work as closely as we can with the emergency managers in Texas and the local communities and through mitigation grants and resilience and those types of efforts, we work with them to build the best emergency management system we can have. And as you saw in Texas, under the secretary's leadership and the president's leadership, it worked very, very well. Under Nim Kidd's guidance, that's a model of how it works.

And I can tell you that Texas is in good hands. And we want to use Texas as a model for how it's done. I spoke to, immediately when I found out the disaster, I was on the phone Friday, Saturday and Sunday, almost constantly speaking to Nim Kidd, the region and that crew there.

And that's why that was the partnership between FEMA and the state and the local was the reason why that was handled so well. And why, although it's a tragedy, it was a model for how to respond to a disaster.

Babin: Okay.

Chairman Perry: Gentleman's time has expired.

Babin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman Perry: Thanks, the gentleman, the chair now recognizes Representative Friedman.

Rep. Friedman (California): Thank you, Mr. Richardson for being here today. I represent a lot of parts of Los Angeles, which of course was devastated by huge mega fires recently. Very appreciative of FEMA's efforts on the ground.

What we've discovered is that currently FEMA bars providing assistance to disaster victims who've received individual charitable donations like through their church or through a GoFundMe page, they're finding that FEMA is deducting that amount. So I introduced a bill, Don't Penalize Victims Act to ensure that charitable donations are not considered a duplication of benefits by FEMA. People aren't raising money to give it to FEMA, they're raising money to give it to victims to help them rebuild their lives.

I would like you to say that you're willing to work with us on this and that you will support these efforts as they move forward.

Richardson: I would be glad to work with you. What I like to say, there should be no politics in emergency management.

I would be glad to work with you and glad to look into it.

Friedman: Thank you. And I'd like to continue on some of the questions that have been asked about FEMA's response to the horrific flooding in Texas.

And as a mom whose daughter has gone to Girl Scout camp and been up in wild areas, that whole incident really broke my heart. So my heart goes out to everybody in Texas that was affected. The New York Times reported last week that on July 7th, three days into the emergency response effort, FEMA call centers responded to less than 20% of the calls coming in from disaster victims for help.

That means more than four out of five calls went unanswered. And I can just imagine the frustration of people looking for loved ones, dealing with damage, dealing with incredible tragedy to find out that their government just wasn't answering the phone. Secretary Noem, however, claimed that on Meet the Press, that the New York Times piece was quote, fake news.

So I'd like to clear this up for the record. Isn't it accurate that 80%, at least, of the calls that went to FEMA call centers on July 7th went unanswered?

Richardson: When the tragedy struck, we knew there would be a-

Friedman: It's a simple yes or no question. They either answered the calls or they didn't answer the calls on July 7th.

Richardson: When there was a spike in calls, FEMA was there to answer the calls. The majority of the calls were answered at the call centers.

Friedman: Well, that's not what the report says.

The report says that on July 5th, as the floodwaters were starting to receive, FEMA received 3,027 calls from disaster survivors and answered 3,000 or 18 of them, which is over 99%. Contractors with four call center companies answered the vast majority of the calls. That evening, however, Ms. Noem did not renew the contracts with those four companies and

hundreds of contractors were fired, according to the documents and the person briefed on the matter.

The next day, July 6th, FEMA received 2,363 calls and answered 846, or roughly 35.8%, according to those documents. And on Monday, July 7th, the agency fielded 16,419 calls and answered 2,613 of them, which is only 15.9%. That's shown by official documents. And FEMA officials were incredibly frustrated by the lapse in those contracts and that it was taking days for Ms. Noem to act.

A little while ago, you said that part of your job you felt was to remove, you called them bureaucratic, closing out bureaucratic procedures. To me, having someone, one person only, having to sign off on every contract of \$100,000 or more is the definition of bureaucracy. And in this case, it led to thousands of victims not having their calls answered by their government.

Their government wasn't there when they reached out for help in their darkest hour. So are those numbers fake? Are you telling me that those are fake numbers or are they verifiable? And did Ms. Noem misspeak when she said that it was fake news?

Richardson: What I can tell you is the vast majority of phone calls were answered. There was never a lapse in the contract.

Secretary Noem, under her leadership, she's concerned about due diligence and making sure the American people get what they deserve.

Friedman: In your mind, 15.9% of calls being answered is the vast majority? That's the vast, that's your, so is that the benchmark now we're looking for for FEMA to answer their calls? 15% or in one case, 35% in a day in the middle of this disaster, this huge disaster?

Richardson: I would have to agree with Secretary Noem, that's fake news. The majority of the calls were answered.

There was never a lapse in contract.

Friedman: Well, that is absolutely not what the reports from these companies from the disaster says. They give specific numbers of calls that went unanswered and I don't see how you can deny these reports, but I will yield my time back.

Chairman Perry: Thank you. Chair, thanks, gentlelady. The chair now recognizes Representative Onder from the state of Missouri.

Rep. Onder (Missouri): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Yeah, thank you, Mr. Richardson, for being here with us today. Missouri experienced severe storms and flash flooding earlier this year on May 23rd and we didn't receive a disaster declaration until last night.

My constituents were frustrated by how long it takes to get temporary housing and debris removal assistance, support from FEMA. Why does it take so long to make these determinations and what's being done to cut the time to get help in these situations?

Richardson: So when the determinations come in, we review them. We work with the regions primarily.

As far as specifics of each one of the declarations, I would like to get back to you and I'll go back home, I'll look into it, I'll figure it out and I'll come back to you and give you any specific details because I think you're looking for specific information on a certain declaration, correct?

Onder: Yeah, or what is the process of issuing these declarations?

Richardson: The declarations come in, there's a set of criteria and then we make a recommendation on that criteria. Once again, it's eligibility based. So there's criteria and we have to take a look at the criteria and make sure.

For example, from the first second I found out about the horrific events in Texas, I got on the phone and I was speaking to the emergency manager there and we were talking about how the declaration was going to come in, how it was going to be crafted. So there's some pre-work that's done right in the middle of the disaster normally and then there's some administrative work that needs to be done at the regional level and then it comes to FEMA. So, but it's normally worked out very early if they meet the criteria or not because we all kind of have a pretty good idea of what it is and then we got to get it down on paper.

And that's what I spent a lot of time on the 4th of July or really the 4th and the 5th with Nim Kidd because theirs came in, I believe it was just after midnight on Sunday. So it came in very quickly from Texas and then the criteria took it and we turned that around within just a couple hours.

Onder: Very good.

And you emphasized the need to cut red tape and remove cumbersome processes to speed up disaster recovery. Can you walk us through specific internal FEMA policies or procedures that you have streamlined to speed up delivery of assistance?

Richardson: Yeah, so one of the things that I recognized immediately and part of it was due from being the Assistant Secretary at CWMD prior, part of it was doing mission analysis. What I discovered is there were three or four contract shops around FEMA.

So we consolidated that and that makes it a lot faster to consolidate, you've got the same people, you're keeping track and then the other thing we do is we make sure that we've got a team that tees those contracts up for me to sign and we have certain ones that have to come to me. So what we've done is we've reduced the number of hands, so to speak, that touch those. We also consolidate it so we know where they are all exactly.

So it's actually working pretty good now and that's what we've done.

Onder: And you've said that FEMA needs to return primacy to the states. For states like Missouri, what would that look like? What kind of shift in operational authority and flexibility to state and local managers might we see?

Richardson: Well, it wouldn't necessarily be, it probably has to do more with training and coordination.

So the coordination is the key piece, how the coordination is done. One of the challenges that FEMA has is when the region comes into the state, even though we run TTXs all the time, I think I was involved in at least seven or eight TTXs all the way from Guam to the Virgin Islands. And one of the things I talked to the folks in the after action about was what gaps in capability they had.

So if the states can become adept at identifying their gaps and they can communicate that to the region, that is part of it. So they know what their shortfalls are. They've pre-identified them so that we can pre-position assets.

That's the key. And once again, states like Texas are kind of a model and they did that very well as demonstrated in the events of the flood. Thank you, I yield back.

Chairman Perry: Chair, thanks to the gentleman. The chair now recognizes representative Figures.

Rep. Figures (Alabama): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you, Mr. Richardson for being here with us today. I represent the second congressional district of Alabama, which begins in Mobile is where I'm from, where I was born, where I was raised. And with the exception of probably Congressman Ezell, I don't know, from Mississippi, I don't know that there's another member on this committee that's actually been through more FEMA-responded disasters from hurricanes throughout the entirety of my life. So it's important to me that FEMA is ready, is prepared, because it's not a matter of if we get hit by a hurricane, it's a matter of when we get hit, and how severe the damage will be, and what FEMA's role will have to be in responding to that.

We are approaching the 20-year anniversary of Katrina, and a lot of focus on Katrina is on New Orleans, but there was an entire realm of the east side of that storm that decimated parts of Mississippi and Alabama as well. And so this is a time where people are focused on some negative history as it relates to FEMA and FEMA's response. And as I sit here, the question that I just have to ask, because if we get hit by a hurricane, or when we get hit by hurricane, and fortunately there's not a bad response, but if there is a bad response from FEMA, I don't want to sit here and the answer is I'm sorry.

I don't want you to be sorry, I want you to be careful, I want you to be prepared, I want you to be ready. So in light of what just happened in Texas, where, you know, a family of five from Mobile, a grandfather, a grandmother, their son, his wife, and their five-year-old daughter were camping there in the hill country, and all of them with the exception of their son died. And so this is something that is resonating in my district right now.

What is, and I'm in no way insinuating that that was FEMA's fault, but what lessons have you learned in the response to Texas that you will apply going forward, particularly through this hurricane season?

Richardson: Thank you for your question. So a lesson learned from Texas, and it is essentially how Texas had forces pre-positioned. For example, there are 28 national urban SAR units.

One of them was in Texas. And it's not that it's a lesson learned, but what we did is we confirmed how effective that is. And under Secretary Norton's leadership, we also confirmed how effective it was for the Emergency Operations Center in Texas to be able to communicate with CBP as well as Coast Guard.

So all those DHS assets were already there. So pre-positioning is something that we've confirmed is a solid practice. Now I think one of my lessons learned, and I think this is an important one.

Obviously, communication, Nim Kidd and I were in communication, I was in communication with Secretary Noem. Coordination, pre-positioning, planning, but the lesson that I particularly learned was personal relationships. I had come to know the emergency manager in Texas, Nim Kidd, and it helped a lot from the second I heard about the disaster.

Figures: Well, I'm going to cut you off, but I want to preserve my time. But is there anything you think FEMA did wrong in its response to the Texas floods that we can rectify and do differently next time?

Richardson: I can't see anything that we did wrong. And I think the president and the secretary acknowledged that.

And so has Governor Abbott by saying how well we did. So what we would like to do is we would like to take the strengths that we did in Texas, and we were going to share them with other states, and we'll work on them in tabletop exercise to make sure that they can do it as well.

Figures: Is there testimony here today that FEMA's response to the Texas flooding was a perfect game? It was perfect?

Richardson: Well, nothing is perfect.

However, I will say that it was a model, particularly at FEMA, the region, and the state level. That continuity was a model how disasters should be handled. And that's thanks to the president's guidance, the secretary's guidance, Governor Abbott, the State Emergency Operations Center in Texas, the emergency manager, as well as the Region 6 manager.

Figures: Well, one thing I would encourage is it's important to see leadership there on the ground when it happens. So if this happens in Mobile, we certainly want to see you on the ground, you know, certainly within a reasonable time of when it happens. The last thing I'll

say is I know notice of fundings for FEMA grants just went out or are in the process of going out the notice of funding opportunities, but they're 68 days late.

And so my concern is making sure that you guys have the resources and the commitment to actually review the incoming applications in a manner where we will not end up in an excessively delayed state when it comes time to actually awarding the funding opportunities. With that, I yield back.

Thank you, Mr. Richardson.

Chairman Perry: Chair, thanks. The gentleman, the chair now recognizes Representative Fong from California.

Rep. Fong (California): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you. Thank you, Administrator, for for being here and for your leadership. A few questions.

I represent a lot of rural communities in the Central Valley of California. We've been dealing with floods and fires for a very long time. The Burrell fire recently was the largest fire that ever hit Kern County.

And I was wondering, rural communities have a challenge of capacity. And of course, becoming from a large state, sometimes the or a lot of times the per capita indicator doesn't doesn't help rural communities. I was wondering, from your perspective, has there been conversations about creating a county level or a zip code level threshold so that resources can go help these communities rebuild?

Richardson: Could you repeat the last part of the question again?

Fong: Is there a way to help communities, rural communities rebuild when the tragedies and the fires and the floods, they don't hit the major disaster declaration? Is there a way to to are you guys looking at a ways to adjust the per capita indicator to to allow for more rural community rebuilding after a disaster?

Richardson: So I got your question.

Thank you for the question. So the question is about rural areas and meeting the threshold. What I will say to that is that and I don't want to get ahead of the FEMA Council, but you know, the President wants for the country better emergency management.

And it's reasonable to believe that that piece that you're just speaking to would be a part of that. Because I don't personally come from a rural community, but my parents come from a rural community. I spent a lot of time in rural communities.

My best friend is a hog farmer in eastern North Carolina. I know rural communities are so it's reasonable that that would be considered in something in the future, yes.

Fong: I would certainly love to partner with you on that and your council.

It's in an area where rural communities just don't have the capacity to when a fire hits significant impact to that community. And they may need resources, but they just may not hit the threshold of a major disaster declaration. And so we want to ensure that we right size the response.

Richardson: Yeah, you have my commitment that I'll engage with you and we can kind of look at it and get your ideas.

Fong: Thank you very much. I want to follow up from the questions that my colleague from Utah asked.

We also dealt with floods. My community in Tulare County had to endure and kind of front a lot of the resources to help rebuild. FEMA has somewhat before you a more complicated, complex assistance work through the complexity of the assistance programs.

Is there a way to simplify the reimbursement process and maybe expand the advanced payments process to help rebuild roads, rebuild bridges that may have been washed away from like a flood?

Richardson: So once again, thanks for your question. And when my team did the mission analysis, when we first came aboard, it was kind of phase one of the mission analysis. And now we're breaking down each one of the mission central tasks.

And now we're getting to those things you're talking about right now. Once again, I'll share that with you when the time comes.

Fong: And your team has been very helpful since the new administration has come in.

I think kind of working through the complexity. So I think you're going to hear a lot from a lot of rural areas, just small communities. They don't have the technical assistance capacity to work through everything.

And the back and forth constantly adds a layer of bureaucracy that maybe we can cut through. It's a very important issue. And then in terms of incentivizing investments to mitigate before disaster strikes, has FEMA and your team looked at how to better incentivize investments in areas of limited resources?

Richardson: We are working on that now.

This will be part of the discussion, the wider discussion that we can have if you give me some time on that.

Fong: Perfect. And I would just want to extend an invitation for you to come to my community.

We would roll out the red carpet for you if you ever come to California. And with that, I yield back.

Richardson: I would love to come. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chair thanks the gentleman. Chair now recognizes the gentleman from California, Mr. Garamendi.

Rep. Garamendi (California): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This committee has for a long time been concerned about FEMA, the way it runs and operates. There have been major efforts by the committee as a whole and by the subcommittee. I'm thinking back on much of the work done by Mr. Graves before he left Congress.

Going forward, the question of whether FEMA is going to be, is going to survive or not remains open. In the first week in office, Mr. Trump, President Trump talked openly about getting rid of FEMA. In March, Secretary Nuland said, we're going to eliminate FEMA.

In June, Trump said FEMA could be eliminated as soon as December, saying he wanted to wean off FEMA and bring it back to the state level. It's not just those words, which are not fake news, by the way. It's also what has actually happened.

A third of the staff at FEMA has been eliminated in the DOJ process. So there's serious concerns, at least by me and I suspect by other members of the committee, about the future of FEMA. Is it even going to exist? Can you commit to us today that FEMA will exist in the future, will be able to carry out its functions under the law and under the needs of this nation? Or do you not know?

Richardson: Thank you for the question.

What I can commit to is that the President wants a better emergency management for the American people. And that's a noble goal. The President is a noble man, and that's what he wants.

He wants a better emergency management capability.

Does that mean FEMA is gone and there'll be something new and different? So, in his wisdom, and with Secretary Nuland and Secretary Hegseth's guide, the President has appointed a FEMA council, okay, that are going to give him recommendations.

Garamendi: So the answer is blowing in the wind.

We do not know and you cannot confirm that it is the policy of the administration to maintain FEMA. I understand that. Let me move along here.

A third of your staff is gone. 2,000 employees have been, have departed for multiple reasons. Some of them fired, others of them taking early retirement.

It took nine days for you to arrive in Texas following the disaster there. Is that the normal going forward? It took three days for your team to arrive, nine days for you to arrive. Is that the new normal?

Richardson: So as I promised, the people of Texas, they would get what they needed on time and on target.

And I talked to the emergency manager of Texas, and I asked him, what is the best thing I can do for you? He said, remain on the ground and make sure that we get what we need on time. So I remained in Washington, DC, kicking down the doors of bureaucracy. That's where I remained.

Garamendi: So the top leadership of FEMA is not expected to respond to emergencies across the nation. Instead, you're going to remain in your offices here in Washington, DC. I got it.

Richardson: I did go to Texas and I went to Texas to confirm with the people of Texas that I had delivered on my promise.

Garamendi: We'll see if that delivery is real or not. The next series of questions has to do with disaster mitigation, that is getting ahead of the disaster.

You just heard from Mr. Fong about his request for funding to reduce the fire risks in his area. Certainly that exists in my area, in the Bay Area. However, that program was terminated.

Even though it was started in 2018 by President Trump in his first term, it's now eliminated. So is it the policy of FEMA to rebuild that program to get ahead of the disasters and to fund disaster mitigation before it happens? What is the policy of the department?

Richardson: You're speaking of the building resilience.

Garamendi: That is correct.

Richardson: So it was started in 2018, but under the Trump administration, that program began to be used for things like bike paths and shade at bus stops –

Garamendi: So instead of eliminating, so instead of dealing with those specific rather small funding programs, you decided to eliminate this entire program. Is that correct?

Richardson: Well, that program, BRIC, is under litigation.

I can tell you about the past, but I can't tell you anything about the future for that program. But it was being used for bike paths.

Garamendi: That's not my question.

What is the future? Is the BRIC program terminated? Is it the intention of FEMA to restart it? Or are we simply not going to pay attention to an effort to reduce the potential for a disaster?

Richardson: Resilience is a top priority of FEMA, but that program, once again, there's litigation surrounding that program and I'm not at liberty to speak of it.

Chairman Perry: Gentlemen, time has expired. Chair thanks the gentleman, the chair now recognizes Representative Rouzer from North Carolina.

Rep. Rouzer (North Carolina): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Richardson, thank you for your service. It's not an easy job that you'd have by any means, but a very, very important job.

Just to finish that line of questioning, or your answer rather, you mentioned BRIC, the BRIC program was funding bicycle paths, and then what else you got cut off. I was just curious what else you were going to say.

Richardson: So there was bicycle paths, it was trees surrounding bus stops, and you know, these grants have been used for a lot of rather, what I would call odd things.

For example, we put people up in the Roosevelt Hotel, or illegal immigrants up in the Roosevelt Hotel, with some of the grants, that wasn't necessarily wise thing to do. We also have funded projects that made DEI ambassadors for the New York City Police Department.

Rouzer: So not exactly mitigation efforts.

Richardson: Right, during the Biden administration, it seems like there were a lot of the grants, a lot of the grants sound good, and then you dig into them, and they're not so good. I've got a note here on a handful of them, but so yeah, if you're housing folks in the, or illegal aliens in the Roosevelt Hotel, that's probably not the best use of the American taxpayers' money. It looks good on the surface, but when you get into it, it's not.

Rouzer: I got the answer there. Let me move on to my questions before I run out of time. So, the Review Council, when does FEMA anticipate the Review Council will finalize and share its recommendations for Congress? Do you have an idea of the timeline on that?

Richardson: The FEMA Review Council is working now, and there's, you know, in the late fall, I believe that's when, or where they plan to give their recommendation to the president.

Rouzer: Thank you for that. Hurricanes Matthew and Florence, they affected my district pretty significantly. Matthew was in 2016, Hurricane Florence was in 2018.

In 2018, Brock Long was the administrator, and I have to say in both of those storms, the FEMA response was very, very good. But we still have, those cases are still open. They've not yet closed.

In other words, there's still need there, and there's still reimbursement that's waiting to be signed, or I'm not sure where it is in the bureaucratic process. And of course, those storms were seven and nine years ago, respectively. Any, or let me just put it this way.

Can you get me a report on exactly what's, what's left to be finished up on it as it relates to those two storms? Not right now, but soon after this hearing when you can.

Richardson: Thank you for the question. Each day I get a snapshot of the open disaster claims, and it's shocking to see how many of them are still open.

And no doubt, we need to reduce the number of open declarations. And yes, I can get back with you, and I'd be happy to get back with you on that.

Rouzer: Yeah, is that an issue of resources or administrative time, or what, what is the holdup there, or regulatory burden of some sort?

Richardson: My gut feeling is, it's just how it's developed over time.

Probably at one point, a handful of people, you know, touched it, and by this point, there's, there's many more people than necessary to touch that.

Rouzer: Okay, one, one last thing. Hurricane Helene didn't hit my district, but it did hit my friend and colleague Chuck Edwards and Virginia Fox really, really hard, their districts in western North Carolina.

Obviously, you have every, and every storm is different. Every locale is, is different. In, in western North Carolina, you have a lot of private roads.

You know, FEMA traditionally doesn't help out with private roads, but if those private roads don't get rebuilt, you can't, you know, get debris and other, and other items that are necessary for recovery, and I think that's been one of the big issues for western North Carolina. Chuck Edwards had tried to get some clarifying language included as part of the CR. That didn't work out, but flexibility in terms of addressing need, because again, not every place is the same, I think is crucially important.

Is that a lot of that you are, are pursuing at all?

Richardson: The question involves private roads, and thanks for the question again. Right, private roads is an issue, particularly for some reason in North Carolina, and we're, we're working for a way where we could, can resolve that and try to, try to provide a resolution to that, and I'll keep in contact with you and make sure you kind of stay abreast of that. Well, until that aspect is handled, it's just hard for that area to make any kind of substantial recovery.

That's the bottom line, and it's somewhat unique to western North Carolina, which speaks to the need for flexibility when you're dealing with these disasters in response. And my heart goes out to the people of North Carolina and that whole region, Tennessee, western Virginia, that had to suffer that tragedy.

Rouzer: Thank you, sir. I yield back.

Chairman Perry: Gentlemen, thanks, or the chair, thanks the gentleman. The chair now recognizes Representative Gillen.

Rep. Gillen (New York): Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Mr. Richardson, for being here today. So, as acting administrator of FEMA, you oversee the agency's preparedness grants, including the non-profit security grant program, and as I'm sure you're aware, synagogues, churches, yeshivas, and many other houses of worship across our country, and certainly in my district on the South Shore of Long Island, rely on these grants to keep their congregants, their worshipers, and our residents safe. And right now, we're facing a huge spike in anti-Semitism and other threats, and these critical grants are more important than ever for my constituents, and I'm sure for many other folks across the country.

And I'm grateful that FEMA recently awarded some of the emergency supplemental funding that was allocated for fiscal year 24. However, the agency still has not opened applications for fiscal year 25 funding, which Congress had approved back in March. So, Mr. Richardson, fiscal year 25 is coming to a close soon, and synagogues and houses of worship, churches in my district are wondering when you might open the application for fiscal year 25 non-profit security grant program, so we can make this \$275 million available for this really important need in my district and across the country.

Richardson: Yeah, and thank you for the question. I believe those grants are very, very important, and we've spent a lot of time in the last couple of months moving forward and doing due diligence on those, but I do have good news. There are no-fos going, I can't speak to that grant specifically, but there are no-fos going out as we speak.

Gillen: Okay, great, and can my office follow up with you about these specific grants, because they are so important in my district.

Richardson: Please do, and you know, one of the things we want to do is we want to make sure we get those notice of fundings out, so the districts have a chance to apply and get back with us. So, yes, please do.

Gillen: Okay, great, and also with respect to these grants, I've heard from a lot of pastors and rabbis that the funding is okay to be used for infrastructure, but not actually for personnel, and so a lot of our synagogues and houses of worship are looking to expand the scope of appropriate uses for this funding to include perhaps security personnel to stand guard at the synagogues, particularly during the High Holy Days or during worship services,

and is that something that we could work with your office on to try to maybe expand the scope of funding?

Richardson: Yeah, I understand the question, the question, please do. I need to look into, you know, the the details of the grant, but I'm sure some way we can we can work around that.

Gillen: Okay, great, thank you, and finally in May, FEMA opened applications for FY24 SAFER grants to help hire, recruit, and retain firefighters, and I wrote to fire departments across my district encouraging them to apply for these grants, and I'm really pleased that the Oceanside Fire Department in my district, which often operates with volunteer service members, put together a really strong application for funding to help them recruit and retrain and train new volunteer firefighters to keep their community safe, and I wrote you a letter in support of their application, and I'd appreciate the opportunity to get in touch with your office again.

Can you commit to working to follow up on this issue also with me after this hearing?

Richardson: Sure, and thanks once again. I think I replied to the letter, but yes, I would be happy to speak with you.

Gillen: Great, thank you so much, Mr. Richardson. I yield back.

Chairman Perry: Chair, thanks, gentlelady. The chair now recognizes Representative Kiley.

Rep. Kiley (California): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thanks for being here today, Mr. Richardson. I'd like to talk to you briefly about a very simple action that the president and FEMA could take that would come at a relatively modest cost, would make an enormous difference for many people in my district, and would reverse an enormous wrong committed by President Joe Biden.

It relates to the Caldor Fire, which you might be familiar with. The Caldor Fire was one of the biggest fires in California history. It was in 2021, and you might remember the images that were really surreal of the ski slopes that were on fire and were ablaze.

The blaze came very close to actually destroying entire town of South Tahoe, which I represent. Fortunately, there was legislation that had created a categorical exclusion for fire mitigation that allowed for a fire break to be created, and we were able to stop it from going into South Tahoe. But folks in the community of Grizzly Flats were not so fortunate.

Hundreds of homes there were destroyed in 2021. The fire was so massive that Joe Biden actually came and visited shortly after and did a tour in a helicopter, and then he made a promise to the victims in Grizzly Flats that he was going to help, that the federal government would support them. He said it was a federal responsibility.

He then broke that promise. Joe Biden's FEMA denied individual assistance to the victims of the Caldor Fire and Grizzly Flats on multiple occasions. I spoke with the president about it personally, and he said he wanted to correct the wrong.

He never did. And so these folks now, several years later, many continue to suffer with the rebuilding process. Many are still just camped out in RVs or trailers on their property, and they still have not received the individual assistance that they're entitled to.

So FEMA, under President Biden, as I mentioned, denied this multiple times. But the president has the authority to grant the assistance himself. And in fact, President Trump did this during his first term for multiple wildfires in California.

So my question is, is this something that you might be able to look into and talk with the president about to finally get the victims of the Caldor Fire, the victims in Grizzly Flats, the individual assistance they deserve?

Richardson: Yeah, I can go both ways on that. Thank you for the question. I can talk to Region 10, Bob Fenton, and I can also reach out to the White House, find out where the Delta is, and then get back to you with a potential way forward.

Kiley: I really appreciate that. And I think there's also room to look at the process by which these determinations are made within FEMA. Because one of the things, for example, that they used in their analysis, even though there are bigger wildfires where folks have gotten the individual assistance, they, for example, looked at the income level in El Dorado County as a whole, which is where Grizzly Flats is.

Even though Grizzly Flats itself is not by any stretch of the imagination a wealthy area, but they counted the overall median income of the county against the people who lost their homes within this particular jurisdiction. There's a lot of arbitrary things like that that just don't make sense. But at the end of the day, this is a promise that the President of the United States, Joe Biden, made to the people in our community, and then he broke that promise.

Richardson: And I'm really hopeful that the president, if he has the ability to do so, can right that wrong. I'll reach out to Region 9, I'll reach out to Region 10, and then I'll be able to get back to you.

Kiley: Thank you very much. Appreciate it. I yield back. I yield to the chair, in fact.

Chairman Perry: I thank the gentleman. Regarding the issue of call time, I just want to reference the New York Times article, which apparently was the source for the dispute over how many people actually received an answer on the call. According to the article, it says, according to a person briefed on the matter who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Now, like I've said before, we all have, I think, reasonable criticisms of and valid criticisms of FEMA. But on this occasion, I just want to make sure we're not making judgments based on people that spoke on the condition of anonymity. And further in the article, it says the

agency did publish similar data on October 29, 2024, which I'll remind everybody was during the last administration, during President Biden's administration, days after Hurricane Helene barreled across the South and nearly three weeks after Hurricane Milton hit Florida.

That information showed the agency did not answer nearly half of the 507,766 incoming calls over the course of a week, E&E News reported. With that having been said, Mr. Administrator, can you, like I said, I think we all want to level set here. People on both sides of the aisle would like to know the efficacy of the call center and the response to people calling in for disasters.

Can FEMA provide that information and the source of that information moving forward? Can we get a report on that so that we can know how well FEMA is performing in that paradigm?

Richardson: So this is how I'll answer this, Mr. Chairman. I think we can legally share that with them. I think we can.

Okay. I don't know for sure, but if we can, we will. I do know that we surged support.

Chairman Perry: Yeah, I understand. I just, I think that both sides of the aisle would like, like again, to level set and know what that information is and the source of that information. And if there's some reason that you can't do it legally, we would like to know that as well, so we can take whatever action is appropriate here in Congress.

Richardson: Yes. All right.

Chairman Perry: I thank the gentleman.

The chair now recognizes the gentlelady, Representative Titus.

Rep. Titus (Nevada): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Secretary, I'd like to go back to the conversation about NOFOs.

You mentioned it several times, said that information is out the door. That's good news because some of these are months behind. I'm particularly interested in the OASI grants.

That's the Urban Area Security Initiative grants, if you're familiar with that. Those are especially important in my district of Southern Nevada and Las Vegas. We have a lot of events, large-scale events that might be subject to a terrorist attack or some other disaster, and we've seen how these grants have been very helpful.

In fact, there was a report that showed where they made such a difference after the Harvest Festival shooting, which is still the largest shooting in American history, at the Super Bowl, the F1. I want to be sure those are going out the door, and if you'll commit to checking on that and let me know so I can tell the first responders and all back home that that's coming.

Richardson: What I can commit to is that we've been doing due diligence on all of the grants and we're getting the NOFOs out the door as we speak.

So, I want to make sure we've got the NOFOs out the door so that we have a chance to respond to them. I can't tell you, can't necessarily tell you exactly which ones, but I can tell you that they are going out the door as we speak.

Titus: Okay, well I'm glad to hear that.

I left a letter to you about this with the Nevada delegation trying to encourage this to happen, so your office will let me know where one of the ones that's going out the door, and I appreciate it.

Richardson: Yeah, and I believe I responded to your letter, Representative Titus.

Titus: Well, thank you.

I look forward to getting that. I also want to talk about another thing that's particular to my district and to the southwest. I wonder if you're aware of which weather condition causes the most death in the United States?

Richardson: I don't know exactly which one causes the most, and I have a hunch which direction you're going on this. I'm not exactly sure.

Titus: Well, you know, it's surprising. A lot of people wouldn't guess this.

They'd say tornadoes or floods or hurricanes, but it's not. It's extreme heat. Extreme heat causes more deaths.

It's less visible than some of these other disasters. It's harder to show on TV. It lasts longer, impacts different people in different ways, but it is the largest cause of death.

And last year in southern Nevada alone, there were 520 heat-related deaths, and we already have nearly 30 just in Clark County in my district already this year. So, I've been working on getting FEMA to recognize extreme heat and be prepared to help communities deal with it, mitigate, and recover, whatever. I'm pleased that I'm introducing a bill that's the Extreme Weather and Heat Response Modernization Act with our ranking member.

So, Mr. Stanton, we introduced that in May, and that will empower FEMA to have more authority to help with this. I wondered if you are aware of it or you would be willing to work with us to help us get this through so extreme heat can be recognized and addressed because it's only going to get worse. It's not going to get better.

Richardson: Thank you, Representative. I do know, and I'll be glad to work with you, and then I do know that the Stafford Act does recognize heat. So, I'm aware the Stafford Act recognizes it, and I'm willing to work with you.

Titus: I appreciate that, and it does recognize, but it's not, you know, it's hard to get it declared and recognized formally because, like I said, it's not as easy to recognize. There's a flood that happens in two days, like in Texas. It's an extended problem, and it, like I said, it hurts different people in different ways, affects lives, and it affects life and goods.

So, Mr. Stanton, I'm sure will appreciate you're getting involved in helping us with that. Thank you. I yield back.

Chairman Perry: Thank you. Chair thanks to General Woolman. The Chair now recognizes the Representative from Pennsylvania, Representative Bresnahan.

Rep. Bresnahan (Pennsylvania): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Mr. Richardson, for being here. I represent Northeastern Pennsylvania, which has been privy to flooding over the years, dating back to 1972, slightly before my time, but still, as I drive around with my family and my grandmother, she'll occasionally point to different areas about how high the water actually was, and then back to 2011, Northeastern Pennsylvania saw some flooding in an area outside of a levee system, which totally decimated a community, ultimately redrawing the flood maps and making it extremely challenging for various different homeowners to be able to get flood insurance and created some additional strains on the school districts. So, actually, back to 2021, we also saw a flood that actually claimed the lives of at least one person in Lackawanna County, and this past May, the City of Scranton was finally able to complete 40 projects, totaling \$5.5 million, to improve eight waterways and infrastructure damaged by severe flooding in August of 2018.

In April, I sent a letter to then Acting Administrator Hamilton asking for the BRIC program to be reinstated, and Mr. Chairman, I asked for unanimous consent to enter that letter into the record.

Chairman Perry: Without objection, so ordered.

Bresnahan: Thank you.

My question would be, I've heard some evolution relating to the BRIC program, and there were a few different programs, actually levee projects that were slated to take place inside of my district, and unfortunately, because of the cancellation of the BRIC program, though about \$10 million of levee construction was unfortunately canceled, as well as another \$2.5 million in the City of Scranton for buyouts for properties that were ravaged by that earlier flooding that I mentioned. My question would be, have you given any thought or has there been any dialogue relating or circulating around the BRIC program, or the possible reinstatement of the BRIC program, or something to the likes or similarity of it?

Richardson: So, thank you for the question, and a bit on BRIC first. As I think you might have alluded to, BRIC originally was during the 2018, during the Trump 45, and then went into the Biden administration, and kind of BRIC went off the rails.

It went off the rails because we were funding things like bus stops and bike paths. So, right now, it's under litigation, and what I can, so I can't really speak about, but what I can tell you

is that resilience is a priority for me, and it's a priority for FEMA. So, even though the BRIC program is under litigation, resilience is an important top priority for me, and I would like to stay engaged with you on that regarding BRIC, I mean regarding resilience.

Bresnahan: I really appreciate that, and I'll use this as an opportunity to invite you to northeastern Pennsylvania and see some of the communities that have unfortunately suffered dire consequences because of flooding, where levees were never even projected. Some of these areas never even had received water in 1972 that ended up being decimated in 2011, just because of different dynamics and landscapes inside of the river. But, I definitely want to continue to stay in touch, work together on some different systems and solutions for my community.

So, I appreciate you being here. I yield back.

Chairman Perry: Chair thanks the gentleman. The chair now recognizes Representative Hoyle.

Rep. Hoyle (Oregon): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. Richardson, for joining us today. I represent the central and south coast of Oregon, very beautiful place, and my constituents have been pummeled by increasingly severe weather due to climate change.

So, whether it's fire or floods or heat domes or ice storm, these extreme weather events that we have not experienced before make it so that my communities and constituents have suffered greatly, and they aren't prepared. So, I will echo my colleague, Mr. Garamendi, and my colleague from Pennsylvania, in stressing the importance of the BRIC grant program. I agree with you.

We have to make sure our tax dollars are used efficiently and well and not in a wasteful manner. But, like Port Orford, this is a coastal rural community in Curry County, Oregon, that just had millions of dollars for water infrastructure upgrades eliminated, even though they had already been allocated. So, they have to stop this project.

That's not a bus stop. That's not DEI. This is absolutely critical.

So, I would encourage, I'd love to work with you to see how we can move forward because now they're in limbo and there's just no other way for them to go forward without federal assistance. And, I also would like to express my gratitude because last night FEMA approved public assistance of nine million dollars to address public infrastructure for damage that happens because of floods. But, there's hundreds of families who are still waiting for federal support to put their lives back together.

These people were advised not to get flood insurance because the areas had never flooded before. So, the personal assistance, and even though it's like \$800 to \$2,000, my community, these communities are almost \$20,000 less than the median income. That \$800 to \$2,000 make all the difference in the world for them to get their lives back on track.

So, we still have, I don't want to play a blame game. There is no administration that has handled FEMA well. None.

It is inefficient. You have people that are traumatized that have to go through bureaucratic processes. I still have 200 people upriver from me that are out of their homes from the 2020 Labor Day fires.

We are waiting for reimbursement from FEMA from 2020, 2021, and every year since then. And, the process is bureaucratic. We're so worried about someone not stealing a penny that we make these traumatized people go through too much.

So, again, we'd love to work with you on how we can have this be more efficient and get aid directly to people and those tax dollars working. So, I have two questions. It's been over two months since Oregon requested a disaster declaration for these floods.

When can families expect a decision on individual assistance? And, secondly, is FEMA still considering changes to the public assistance thresholds that would cut off support disasters like our floods in Oregon? Because that doesn't look like reform. It looks like an action that's going to punch people while they're down. So, those are my two questions.

Richardson: So, thank you for the questions. And, flooding, by the way, is, as you know, the most costly disaster that we have. Regarding the first question, could you just really summarize the two questions?

Hoyle: So, my first question, how do we track and when can we expect a decision on individual assistance? We got the public assistance, but this individual assistance might, in the scope of a federal budget, look small, but it's massive, massive to my communities.

Richardson: So, all the declarations have been cleared. I was briefed on that this morning.

Hoyle: So, they're all cleared at this point. Even for the for the individual assistance?

Richardson: Yeah, I believe so. But, I was briefed on this morning.

So, I do believe that they were cleared yesterday.

Hoyle: And then, is FEMA still considering changes to the public assistance threshold that would cut off support for disasters like our floods, our fires, the ice storms? I mean, these are not things we have suffered from before and kind of smaller areas. So, we oftentimes just get overlooked.

Richardson: So, as I understand the question, as we currently stand, they remain the same. However, the future of FEMA is going to be determined by the council. So, that would be forthcoming, depending on what the council decides to recommend to the president.

Hoyle: Okay. And then, finally, I will just say again, please do not throw the baby out with the bath water. Do not eliminate and completely take out the BRIC programs because the really, really important work that's done and we need those dollars.

I get that we can disagree or, you know, you can say that you don't think this is the way money should be spent. But, water infrastructure and resilience are critical and that is something in a bipartisan way we should agree that our federal dollars should be pointed towards. So, thank you so much.

Richardson: Thank you.

Chairman Perry: Chair thanks to the gentlewoman. The Chair now recognizes Representative Carbajal.

Rep. Carbajal (California): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Mr. Richardson, for being here. I want to start by reminding all of us why these federal dollars exist in the first place.

To support the American people when they need it the most. These funds are meant to help communities prepare for the worst and respond quickly when disasters strike. Mr. Richardson, you say you stayed in Washington during a recent disaster to kick down the doors of bureaucracy.

But, for the central coast and for many communities across the country, FEMA delays in reimbursements have had real consequences. Contractors, cities, counties are forced to front the costs of emergency response and recovery, straining local budgets and slowing down rebuilding efforts. Yet, when it's time for the federal government to pay back local communities, it is holding funds rather than repaying its share.

Why? Because Secretary Noem is now personally reviewing every FEMA grant contract over a hundred thousand dollars. This bureaucratic bottleneck is suffocating our communities. I have heard from my constituents from the County of San Luis Obispo, the City of San Luis Obispo, the County of Santa Barbara, the County of Ventura, and various water districts throughout my district.

They are not receiving the reimbursements that they are owed. Today, I want to focus my questions on these issues. Mr. Richardson, what specific action is FEMA taking to clear these overdue reimbursements and how much longer will my constituents on the central coast have to wait?

Richardson: Thank you for your question.

So, the reimbursements and the bureaucratic nature of that is indeed something I'm concerned about because I will kick down doors of bureaucracy. And we are digging into that now because it takes far, far too long for the reimbursements and also to close out the disasters. So, it's something that we are looking into.

I don't necessarily have a timeline, but I can work with you to let you know.

Carbajal: Thank you. For months, Donald Trump has claimed that he is cutting red tape and his administration is doing that in Washington.

For communities on the central coast, it sure doesn't feel that way. What process improvements has FEMA implemented or will implement to accelerate these reimbursements?

Richardson: So, one of the things that I've done, and once again, thank you for the question, is I've consolidated the office was somewhat disparate when addressing these. What I've done is I've consolidated those functions in FEMA so we can get a better handle on it and better reporting measures for it.

And I can share those with you.

Carbajal: Love to have that information. What accountability measures or metrics does FEMA use to track reimbursement timelines internally? And would you commit to provide this committee and me a report on average processing times for reimbursement claims, especially for the central coast disasters over the past few years?

Richardson: What I can do is I can commit to looking into it and then getting a hold of you and talking through it.

Carbajal: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Chairman Perry: Chair thanks.

The gentleman, the chair is going to recognize the ranking member for a moment for a close.

Stanton: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I do have one final question for Mr. Richardson.

Like you, the loss of life from the Texas flood haunts me. Pictures in my mind of people clinging to trees, some who were saved by Coast Guard or other heroes in this incident. But it haunts me that we could have had more urban search and rescue preposition in place.

We could have saved more of those people who were clinging onto those trees, but weren't able to hang on for long enough. You testified here today that you relied on the judgment of the Texas emergency management officials, including Texas pre-based urban search and rescue. But FEMA did not act to bring in and preposition additional urban search and rescue.

That was a choice. The choice was made not to preposition those additional search and rescue. In light of the fact that the lack of the greater number of urban search and rescues that could have saved more lives, do you still agree with President Trump's assessment that the response to the horrific Texas floods was, quote, the best FEMA response ever, unquote?

Richardson: The response in Texas, which was community-led, state-managed and federal-supported, brought the maximum amount of capability to bear in Texas at the right time and the right place.

To the Secretary's leadership, to the President's leadership, to my own leadership, to Nim Kidd's leadership, to Region 6, we made that happen. And that is a model of how response should be done. The maximum capability.

Remember, emergency management is not a pile-on sport. It's well-coordinated. It relies on personal relationships.

It's got to be exercised beforehand. And all those things came together on Texas' worst day. And we all grieve for the state of Texas.

All those things came together to show what President Trump and Secretary Noem called the best response ever. And I agree that it was an outstanding response. And the people of Texas deserved that outstanding response.

And Texas emergency managers, Region 6, all did an outstanding job.

Stanton: I will strongly disagree that all of the resources brought to bear that could have been. I think it was a choice by FEMA to not fulfill their statutory responsibility to pre-position under the circumstances.

I believe that that likely cost lies in the circumstances. And I believe it's a shame that you say that this was the quote, best FEMA response ever. I yield back.

Chairman Perry: Chair thanks the gentleman. And just again, once the level's set, let's make sure we understand definitionally what pre-positioning means and why it occurs. And in this instance, flood warnings happen all across the country on a regular basis.

And FEMA doesn't pre-position to every flood warning it gets because they would pre-position literally 365 days a year or just about something close to that. That having been said, with fast moving disasters like the one that occurred in Texas, it is not like a hurricane, which you can track, you can anticipate landfall or the location of the disaster to pre-position assets. And so definitionally, we need to just make sure again, level setting what the expectation is here.

Again, there are plenty of reasons to be critical of FEMA. And those criticisms are justified in many cases, but definitionally, we must understand and recognize what the limit of the expectations are. And in this case, what pre-positioning is for and what it's all about.

That having been said, I thank the gentleman. The gentleman does yield back. Are there further questions from any members of the subcommittee who have not been recognized seeing none? That concludes our hearing for today.

I'd like to thank the witness for his testimony. This subcommittee now stands adjourned.