



OFFICE of the GOVERNOR

JOHN BEL EDWARDS

Written Testimony on the “Oversight of the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Response to the Baton Rouge Flood Disaster”

Subcommittee on Transportation and Public Assets of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

Governor John Bel Edwards, State of Louisiana

As prepared for delivery

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Chairman Mica, Ranking Minority Member Duckworth, and Members of the Subcommittee on Transportation and Public Assets:

I want to thank you for the opportunity to be here today to serve as a voice for the incredible people of Louisiana – who happen to be the most resilient people I know.

First, Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for taking the time to travel to Louisiana to witness this devastation first-hand. It’s hard to imagine what the people of Louisiana are going through without seeing it for yourself, so we thank you for bringing attention to the disaster.

Last month, an unnamed storm dropped over **7 trillion gallons** of rainwater in South Louisiana, flooding more than 100,000 homes and claiming 13 lives. Roughly 30,000 search and rescues were performed, with 11,000 citizens sheltered at the peak of the flood. There were 19,900 Louisiana businesses and 278,500 Louisiana workers disrupted by the flood.

To put the truly historic nature of this flood into perspective, some areas of Louisiana received more rain than the equivalent to the amount of water discharged by the Mississippi River into the Gulf of Mexico over the course of 80 days.

It was a 1,000 year storm that left three times as much rain in Louisiana as Hurricane Katrina did 11 years ago.

The storm didn't have a name, but every person it affected does. Homes and businesses that had never flooded before were suddenly under water. Many families lost everything – and not just their homes. They lost priceless possessions that no amount of assistance can ever replace. Entire communities were uprooted. Children were left without schools to return to and thousands of small businesses – the cornerstone of these communities in South Louisiana – were destroyed.

As of just yesterday, nearly 140,000 households have registered for assistance with FEMA. Our early, and it is still early, estimates show at minimum an \$8.7 billion loss for the state of Louisiana as a result of this flood event. To put a dollar amount on the devastation, thus far, the federal government has distributed nearly half a billion dollars in housing assistance to the people in my state who lost their homes.

The flood waters did not discriminate. Neighborhoods of all shapes and sizes were left uninhabitable. And the story is the same whether you live in the more populated Baton Rouge or rural Lake Arthur where their residents stepped up to build a flood wall all on their own. The miles upon miles of sheer destruction is hard to imagine, but it's heartbreaking to see as you walk the streets in Southeast and Southwest Louisiana.

As the flood waters rose, I requested a federal disaster declaration for the affected parishes. Within hours, that initial request was granted by President Obama, and within the next 48 hours, 20 Louisiana parishes received major federal disaster declarations. At times, we were working both response and recovery as waters receded in some places yet caused more flooding in others.

Twenty-six parishes granted in this declaration joined an additional 36 parishes declared a major disaster just last March in the first round of historic flooding Louisiana experienced in the last eight months. Right now – 56 of Louisiana's 64 parishes have received a federal disaster declaration as a result of March and August flooding this year alone.

Recovery from a disaster of this magnitude takes time and an abundance of resources. I am grateful for the help we have already received from FEMA and our federal partners, and the outpouring of generosity from people across the country has been unparalleled.

Thanks to the quick response of the federal government, we received word yesterday that the federal portion of the cost share will be adjusted to 90 percent of the costs associated with this disaster, as opposed to the customary 75 percent. I can tell you, there is not a state in the nation, in my opinion, where this will have such a significant impact as in Louisiana.

And from the moment we began monitoring this storm, the federal government has been alongside us to help. FEMA representatives were on the ground with our emergency preparedness team to streamline the disaster response coordination with the federal government. I have had the opportunity to meet with Administrator Craig Fugate on several occasions, and Tony Robinson, who you'll hear from today, traveled to **every single parish** affected by this flooding with me as we worked both on the response and as we transitioned to recovery.

While I am grateful for the quick response we have received from this flooding, I am under no illusion that the response has been perfect. I urge FEMA to ramp up the delivery and installation of manufactured housing units in Louisiana. While the response with manufactured housing units has been quicker than any other Louisiana disaster, it has not been fast enough for the families in Louisiana who have lost their homes and have no place to go.

Nearly one month after this flooding began, 662 families have been approved for manufactured housing. However, only 48 manufactured housing units are currently in the process of being installed.

I am asking FEMA to explore ways in which it can expedite the MHU process to ensure that those who have been impacted by this flood can transition into a stable living environment.

I recognize that this isn't the FEMA of 11 years ago, but we can always learn how to best serve those in need. We can always improve upon our response to

disasters. And we can always strive to make times of disaster easier on the people who are impacted.

Flood waters in Louisiana touched places that never before flooded. This has put many of our local communities and homeowners – who were in compliance before the flood – in the untenable position of not being able to afford to rebuild their own homes, even though the flood maps will not change as a result of this event.

Louisiana has learned from the aftermath of other weather events, like Superstorm Sandy, how to effectively mobilize from response to recovery as we work to address the housing needs of individuals and families displaced by the flood. Our state has implemented an innovative housing program called “Shelter at Home.”

The Shelter at Home program enables eligible individuals or families whose homes were damaged to take shelter in their own homes while they rebuild if up to \$15,000 of work in that home can create a safe, secure, habitable place for the family to live while they continue their permanent home rebuilding.

The focus of this program is simple – we want to get people back into their homes and communities operating as quickly as possible. This program doesn’t make a home whole or fully repaired, but it does help families get a jumpstart on their full recovery. Louisiana is operating the Shelter at Home program in partnership with the federal government, and we have had more than 17,500 homeowners register for this program in the two weeks since we launched it, indicating a real desire for Louisiana families to return home and to a sense of normalcy.

It is within this framework that we have traveled to the nation’s capital to secure much-needed assistance in our state’s recovery efforts.

I am calling on Congress to support a supplemental appropriation of \$2 billion of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to allow for additional public investments in housing, economic development, and resilient infrastructure. Louisiana’s housing need is projected to exceed \$1.2 billion alone. With an outlook of \$3 billion in economic loss, and preliminary estimates of \$8.7 billion in damages, not including public infrastructure loss, a \$2 billion request in CDBG funds is a necessary first step to rebuilding Louisiana. Simply put, we cannot recover without this assistance.

I am also asking Congress to clear the \$724 million backlog of Federal Highway Administration emergency relief funding to ensure that Louisiana can effectively manage the rebuilding of infrastructure crippled by the flood. Rising flood waters forced the closure of over 200 highways statewide including every interstates except one. There were approximately 30 state roads that were washed out as result of the flood. By clearing the emergency relief funding backlog, Louisiana would be able to receive \$14 million from the March 2016 flood and up to \$25 million for this most recent flood to help address our critical infrastructure needs.

Although this was a 1,000 year flood event, it is imperative that we protect our state and its citizens from more extreme weather events in the future. To that end, I am requesting \$125 million in funding for the Army Corps of Engineers to fully fund the Comite River Diversion project, which has been underway for nearly 20 years yet never completed. The completion of this project, coupled with the completion of the Amite River Basin study, will allow our state to rebuild communities in a safer and more resilient manner.

I also believe that is it critically important to address the social service needs of Louisiana families, particularly children, who have suffered through the trauma of this disaster. The ability of our state to provide quality mental health and support services to disaster-affected populations is crucial. To that end, I am requesting a supplemental appropriation of \$92 million in Social Services Block Grant funding to provide support services to the vulnerable individuals and families affected by this disaster.

Louisiana **will** move forward. The resilient spirit of our people never ceases to amaze me, but we still need help to truly recover. We have a long road ahead of us to meet the diverse needs of our citizens, communities, economy, and infrastructure. I look forward to working with Congress, with the support of Louisiana's Congressional Delegation, as well as with this administration and the next to ensure that our great state fully recovers from the historic and unprecedented flooding that has turned too many lives upside down.