FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell Delivers Speech at National Hurricane Conference

Release Date: Th4 13, 2022

WASHINGTON -- Today, FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell delivered a speech on hurricane and disaster preparedness at the National Hurricane Conference in Orlando, Florida.

Below is the Administrator’s speech as prepared for delivery.

Hello, again! It is great to be with you today.

I would like to thank the conference committee for inviting me to speak, and as always, this truly has turned out to be a spectacular event.

I would also like to thank Directors Graham, Guthrie, and Tingle for your leadership and outstanding work you are doing in service to your communities. On behalf of FEMA, we thank you for your trust and your partnership in our shared missions.

Risk, resilience, innovation, and partnerships – this is what I want to talk to you about today.

Risk is something to embrace.

Resilience is our endgame.

Innovation is what will carry us into the future.

And partnerships are something we simply cannot do our jobs without.

After the last few years, the fast-approaching 2022 Atlantic Hurricane Season might cause us to feel a sense of hesitation – a sense of “can we just hold off for a couple of more months?”

Perhaps it is because the 2021 season still feels fresh for some of us.

The National Hurricane Center last week issued its final report on Hurricane Ida – a relentless storm that made a calamitous trek from southeast Louisiana all the way up the eastern seaboard.

The report had Ida, Laura and the 1856 Hurricane tied for the strongest storms to hit Louisiana. Damages from Ida totaled $55 billion dollars in Louisiana – over half of the $75 billion that encompassed damages recorded by 8 other states.

Is this our new normal? Data seems to indicate that it is.

Last week, two other reports were released outlining both the fiscal and physical impacts we can expect to face in this country due to the changing climate.

The Office of Management and Budget estimated climate change could lead to an annual Federal revenue loss at the end of the century of 7.1 percent, which in today's dollars would equal $2 trillion per year.

And the United Nations Climate Science Panel's report said that unless global greenhouse gas emissions peak no later than 2025, and are cut by 43% in 2030, the world will likely experience extreme climate events.

Now, does this information cause us to sink back into our seats? Perhaps

But I encourage us to embrace this information – not discount it as alarmist.

We have the world's top climate scientists working hand-in-hand, nation-to-nation, to arm us with information that can help save lives and protect property.

So, let's leverage this data and act.

Let's use it to inspire a collective shift to a future-based mindset across all levels of government and communities nationwide.

Let's use it to anticipate, plan for, and mitigate risks that are 10, 20, 30 years down the road.

And most importantly, let's consider this as an opportunity to provide our future generations – like our children and grandchildren – with the chance to thrive in

safe, strong, and resilient communities.

Whether rural, urban, or suburban, we are a country of diverse landscapes and diverse people.

Our communities all have unique vulnerabilities, populations, and needs – so we deliver our assistance to meet their needs, not ours.

We must commit ourselves to reducing longstanding barriers to assistance and delivering equitable outcomes for all survivors.

We have done this at FEMA in part through bold policy changes to our individual assistance program.

For instance, we expanded the types of ownership and occupancy documentation we can accept from survivors who previously struggled to provide the information due to a property being informally passed down through heirship.

This policy change led to over $300 million dollars in the pockets of almost 95,000 survivors who, previously, would have been ineligible for assistance.

We also changed the way we calculate the threshold for property losses to qualify for our Direct Housing program – such as a trailer or mobile home. A review of our policy found that it was regressive, and negatively impacted those who reside in lower-valued homes.

That change resulted in over 1,400 families receiving assistance who would have been considered ineligible for direct housing in the past.

These changes did not require an act of Congress. They required us to take a hard look at our policies and make sure we were putting people first.

My leadership team will continue to examine FEMA’s programs and policies to identify areas where we can continue to enact positive and effective change to meet the needs of survivors.

And more good news is on the way.

Last week, the House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved bipartisan legislation called the Small Project Efficient and Effective Disaster or SPEED Recovery Act.

If passed by the Senate into law, the SPEED Act will raise the statutory small projects threshold to $1 million dollars.

This means more recovery projects would qualify as a “small project” under the Stafford Act, in turn streamlining processes and paperwork for many projects, reduce administrative burdens, and provide more certainty in the recovery process for communities.

FEMA is committed to leading the way in reaching nationwide climate resilience – and we are committed to doing it right.

I believe one of the biggest mistakes we can make is to blanket the nation with a one-size-fits-all approach to disaster mitigation.

That is why we must tailor mitigation strategies to meet every community’s unique needs.

A story I often like to share is one that proves mitigation works, that it matters, and that it saves lives.

Last November, tremendous rainfall impacted Mount Vernon, Washington, causing the Skagit River to crest at nearly 37 feet. A flood wall installed in 2017 was put to the test – and passed with flying colors. The flood wall kept water out of the downtown neighborhood, sparing businesses and homes from untold damage.

Seeing images like this emerge from communities in the aftermath of an extreme weather event– houses still standing – roads accessible – communications up –stop lights functioning – people alive –proves again that mitigation works, that it matters, and that it saves lives.

It is success stories like this which help us gain the support in our mission to achieve nationwide climate resilience.

When FEMA received a historic $5.8 billion dollars in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law dedicated solely to hazard mitigation funding, it was clear we had the support

of President Biden and of Congress to do this important work.

With this support, FEMA recently announced the launch of our new Swift Current initiative – a program grounded in equity and designed with the survivor in mind.

Through our Flood Mitigation Assistance program, we are providing $60 million dollars to flood-prone homeowners in Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey and Pennsylvania – 40% of which is headed to underserved communities.

This initiative – the first to be funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law – will help homeowners plagued by severe and repetitive loss retrofit, elevate, or even relocate their homes.

And this is just one step we are taking to make climate resilience a reality for all people in all communities.

We know that small and disadvantaged communities continue to face barriers in taking on mitigation projects.

This is because the development of plans and getting through the application process takes time, it can be costly, and it can be overwhelming.

Many of you know this.

This is especially difficult for emergency management offices with limited staff and small budgets.

I personally know what it was like to have a team of two fulfilling our day-to-day duties while trying to navigate bureaucratic federal assistance programs – the issue is a lack of capacity, not of interest.

To break down these barriers, we are deploying Direct Technical Assistance to the communities who need our help the most.

Provided through our BRIC program, and designed to provide holistic mitigation planning support at the earliest stages to communities, FEMA is assisting with both project or application-specific needs and community-wide resilience needs for up to three years.

We are seeing tremendous growth in the interest of the program.

For context, we went from 12 applications submitted in the first year to over 70 submitted this year.

This can be attributed to, intentional and aggressive outreach to communities who need this assistance, and also, the call for nationwide resilience being answered.

I would like to thank all of you in this room who helped get the word out on our Direct Technical Assistance program – it truly has been a team effort.

We also know that strong, hazard-resistant building codes are a cornerstone of loss reduction. They save property, but more importantly, they save lives.

Through FEMA's landmark building codes study, we found that the U.S. communities that chose to adopt modern building codes will avoid paying $132 billion dollars in damages by the year 2040.

We also found through the study that 65% of our country's counties, cities, and towns still have not adopted modern building codes.

So, we have a way to go.

That's why we have been working over the past two years to coordinate, prioritize, and advance the adoption and enforcement of disaster-resistant building codes and standards for agency programs and communities nationwide.

This work has culminated into the release of FEMA's Building Code Strategy, which I am proud to announce for the first time today.

FEMA's Building Code Strategy will do a few things:

It will Guide our efforts to integrate building codes and standards across the agency.

It will strengthen nationwide capability for superior building performance.

It will support vulnerable communities.

And it will drive public action to increase the adoption and enforcement of hazard-resistant building codes to reduce the negative impacts of climate change.

I have visited many communities recovering from hurricanes in this role.

Like Grand Isle, Louisiana for example.

I stood in between houses in which one was standing strong, while the other was reduced to rubble.

The difference? The adoption of modern building codes – our best defense in defying the elements.

And it is partners such as the International Code Council who are here today, that are making the difference.

I would like to thank the ICC for their advocacy and partnership in promoting and educating communities on the critical importance of modern building codes and standards.

And to be successful in meeting the missions of the future, we need the tools and resources to help get us there.

That is where innovation comes in – what will carry us into the future.

Just think about the tools and technology that have advanced our work in the last 10 years.

From unmanned aircraft measuring debris piles with LiDar technology – to drones completing damage assessments in the days after a disaster.

But what if we could simulate the impacts of a category 6 hurricane?

Florida International University's Extreme Events Institute is doing just this.

Through funding provided by the U.S. National Science Foundation, FIU will be leading a multidisciplinary team of researchers and practitioners from eight other universities and the private sector to design the "Cat 6" prototype facility.

The national full-scale testing facility is capable of simulating wind speeds of up to 200 miles per hour, combined with a water basin to simulate storm surge and wave action.

This kind of cutting-edge research and testing capabilities are what we need to meet the nation's evolving risks – to help us adapt to future conditions – and to protect life and property.

I know we have our FIU friends here in the audience, and I would like to thank them for their great work helping advance the technology and the tools we need to become a more prepared and resilient nation.

Being able to predict the impacts of climate change requires understanding the science driving the change – and agencies like NOAA are helping lead the way.

The National Water Model for example, a cornerstone of NOAA's Water Initiative, forecasts the flow of rivers and streams throughout the entire continental United States, in turn helping us make life saving decisions and increasing our resilience to water risks.

This serves as an especially important tool as we continue to see hurricanes maintain their strength well inland while causing rivers to crest well above flood stage.

These kinds of events continue to prove that you do not have to live on the coast to suffer impacts from a coastal event.

And I thank our partners in the room who are helping advance the way we inform and warn threatened communities through social science and hard-science weather prediction.

From the American Meteorological Society, to NOAA, to The National Weather Service, the National Hurricane Center, and the LSU Hurricane Center, thank you for leading us into the future through innovation and great partnership.

And let's talk partnerships – something we cannot do our jobs without.

Take an Emergency Operations Center for example.

Disaster happens, EOC activates, everyone shows up.

Local, state, federal, voluntary, and private sector partners are all in the same room solving complex problems and making decisions, together.

And throughout the event–we are building partnerships – building trust – and even making lifelong friends.

But how do we inspire this kind of connection left of boom?

How can we build strong partnerships during mitigation and preparedness that carry over into response and recovery?

I am not saying this is not already happening, but it is not yet an industry norm – and it needs to be.

We need more people sitting at the table when preparedness and mitigation are being discussed.

More people ready to lean in – ready to pull mitigation and preparedness out from behind the shadows of response and recovery.

Some of you in this room are already doing this, and I encourage you to share your success far and wide.

Because if there is one thing we know, and President Ford may have said it best, "Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success."

I leave you today with a call-to-action.

And it is this: Let's not only understand our future risk, let's embrace it.

Our time is now to affect real, generational change in this country.

But it won't be easy. It will require us to push boundaries and to be innovative.

It will require us to expand our network, bring new partners to the table, and work toward our common goal of building a safer, stronger, and more resilient nation.

It will require us to identify what works and elevate it.

Because the truth is, our challenges cannot be solved by one group or one industry – a silver bullet simply does not exist.

We are in the business of partnerships – and if nationwide climate resilience is our endgame – we simply cannot act alone.

Thank you for all that you do for your communities, and for allowing me to speak to you today.