

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 6, 2018

William B. Long  
Administrator  
Federal Emergency Management Agency  
500 C. Street S.W.

Dear Administrator Long,

We write today to request information regarding the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) plans to prepare for the upcoming hurricane season, following the devastation in Florida, Texas, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands caused by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria.

Hurricane Harvey hit Texas on August 25, 2017, causing the temporary displacement of nearly 39,000 residents across Texas and Louisiana, \$125 billion in damage, and a total of 103 deaths.<sup>1</sup> Within weeks, two powerful hurricanes—Irrma and Maria—struck the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and Florida. The storms caused widespread destruction, particularly in the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, including persistent and ongoing power outages and widespread damage affecting the availability of housing, medical services, and clean water.<sup>2</sup>

There remains much to be done to support the short- and long-term recovery of the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. Months after the landfalls of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, more than 400,000 Puerto Ricans are still without power.<sup>3</sup> Access to clean water remains unavailable for tens of thousands of Puerto Rico residents.<sup>4</sup> Much of the island's infrastructure remains crippled or in disarray, leading to the threatened closure of hundreds of schools and foreclosure of thousands of homes.<sup>5</sup> The healthcare system in the U.S. Virgin Islands remains fragile, and medical providers are operating with limited capacity. In St. Thomas, the structural damage to

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<sup>1</sup> Kimberly Amadeo, "Hurricane Harvey Facts, Damage and Costs," *The Balance* (February 13, 2018) (online at: <https://www.thebalance.com/hurricane-harvey-facts-damage-costs-4150087>); National Hurricane Center, "National Hurricane Center Tropical Cyclone Report – Hurricane Harvey" (online at: [https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL092017\\_Harvey.pdf](https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL092017_Harvey.pdf))

<sup>2</sup> Eric Levenson, "3 Storms, 3 Responses: Comparing Harvey, Irma and Maria," *CNN* (September 27, 2017) (online at: <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/26/us/response-harvey-irma-maria/index.html>)

<sup>3</sup> Arelis Hernandez, "Explosion in Puerto Rico knocks out power, emphasizing grid frailty after Hurricane Maria," *Washington Post* (February 12, 2018) (online at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/explosion-in-puerto-rico-knocks-out-power-emphasizing-grids-frailty-after-hurricane-maria/2018/02/12/bde7dae2-0ffd-11e8-9570-29c9830535e5\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.c0547cd739de](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/explosion-in-puerto-rico-knocks-out-power-emphasizing-grids-frailty-after-hurricane-maria/2018/02/12/bde7dae2-0ffd-11e8-9570-29c9830535e5_story.html?utm_term=.c0547cd739de))

<sup>4</sup> StatusPR, "Food and Water Map" February 28, 2017 (online at: <http://status.pr/>)

<sup>5</sup> Relief Web, "305 schools face closure as hurricane-hit Puerto Rico tackles budget crisis" (online at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/puerto-rico-united-states-america/305-schools-face-closure-hurricane-hit-puerto-rico-tackles>); Matthew Goldstein, "The Next Crisis for Puerto Rico: A Crush of Foreclosures," *New York Times* (December 16, 2017) (online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/16/business/puerto-rico-housing-foreclosures.html>)

medical providers are operating with limited capacity. In St. Thomas, the structural damage to the island's only hospital has forced a significant decrease in services and available beds for patient care.<sup>6</sup> St. Croix's only hospital similarly suffered extensive damage to its operating rooms. Power wasn't fully restored to the Virgin Islands until January 9, nearly four months after Hurricane Irma.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, state and local officials in Texas and Florida have expressed concerns about the lack of preparations made for the upcoming hurricane season.<sup>8</sup> These officials raised concerns about the accessibility and safety of current and prospective shelters, ability of residents to return to their homes following disasters, and resources for rebuilding public agencies in small cities and rural areas.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) ranked Hurricanes Harvey, Maria, and Irma as the second, third, and fifth most costly hurricanes on record, respectively.<sup>9</sup> Overall, projections indicate that they will cost the country approximately \$265 billion, higher than the previous record of \$159 billion in 2005 dollars.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, hurricanes like Harvey, Maria, and Irma are likely to become more common as climate change causes hurricanes to become more intense, carry more rain, and cause worse flooding due to sea level rise and warmer water temperatures.<sup>11</sup> According to NOAA, 2017 was the seventh most active season on record and was the most active season since 2005. Scientists predict that this type of destruction will continue in future years, making advanced planning and preparations for frequent and stronger hurricanes both prudent and necessary. And early projections suggest that the 2018 hurricane season—which runs from June 1 through November 30—could be as active, if not more active, than the 2017 season.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Greg Allen, "In the U.S. Virgin Islands, Health Care Remains in a Critical State," *NPR* (February 4, 2018) (online at: <https://www.npr.org/2018/02/04/582256476/in-the-u-s-virgin-islands-health-care-remains-in-a-critical-state>)

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Mazzei, "Power is Restored to Most of U.S. Virgin Islands After Hurricanes, Officials Say," *New York Times* (January 9, 2018) (online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/09/us/virgin-islands-power.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=8337303CA2A8CCFF3BAF03D10130605D&gwt=pay>)

<sup>8</sup> Victoria Advocate, "Officials Ask for Help Before Next Hurricane Season," *Emergency Management* (February 21, 2018) (online at: <http://www.govtech.com/em/disaster/--Officials-Ask-for-Help-Before-Next-Hurricane-Season.html>)

<sup>9</sup> National Hurricane Center, "Costliest U.S. tropical cyclones tables updated" (online at: <https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/news/UpdatedCostliest.pdf>)

<sup>10</sup> National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, "Hurricane and Tropical Storms – Annual 2017" (online at: <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/tropical-cyclones/201713>); Willie Drye, "2017 Hurricane Season Was the Most Expensive in U.S. History," *National Geographic* (November 30, 2017) (online at: <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/11/2017-hurricane-season-most-expensive-us-history-spd/>)

<sup>11</sup> Brian Resnick, "Hurricane season 2017: what the hell just happened?," *Vox* (November 30, 2017) (online at: <https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2017/10/25/16504488/hurricane-season-2017-what-the-hell>); Phillip Klotzbach and Michael Bell, "Summary of 2017 Atlantic Tropical Cyclone Activity and Verification of Authors' Seasonal and Two Week Forecasts," *Colorado State University* (November 30, 2017) (online at: <https://tropical.colostate.edu/media/sites/111/2017/11/2017-11.pdf>)

<sup>12</sup> Brett Clarkson, "Only 6 more months to next hurricane season – and it could be another doozy," *Sun Sentinel* (November 30, 2017) (online at: <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/weather/hurricane/fl-reg-hurricane-seasons-ends-20171129-story.html>)

On a January 31, 2018 call with congressional staff, FEMA officials indicated that the agency is in the process of stockpiling commodities, including non-perishable food and water, in Puerto Rico to prepare for the upcoming hurricane season. We were pleased to hear that FEMA is working to prepare for future hurricanes, and are interested in gaining a more detailed understanding of the steps that the agency is taking to ready Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and other parts of the country for the 2018 hurricane season. Therefore, we ask that you respond to the following questions by March 19, 2018, as well as provide a staff-level briefing on these issues no later than March 21, 2018.

1. Please provide a description of the steps that FEMA is currently taking to prepare the country for the 2018 hurricane season. How will FEMA's experience during the 2017 hurricane season inform its preparation for the 2018 season? What specific changes in policy or protocol have been made by FEMA following the 2017 hurricane season?
2. Please provide a description of the steps that FEMA is taking to prepare Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and other regions threatened by hurricanes for the upcoming hurricane season. What commodities—including food, water, generators, cots, blankets, tarps and blue roofs, and first aid supplies—does FEMA plan to pre-position in advance of June 1?
3. Please provide a description of the steps that FEMA is taking to prepare Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and other regions threatened by hurricanes for any short- or long-term damage or inaccessibility to physical and electronic communications infrastructure in the upcoming hurricane season. How does FEMA intend to adjust its processes for disaster assistance in the event of such communications infrastructure damage?<sup>13</sup>
4. Please provide a description of the steps that FEMA is taking to prepare Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and other regions threatened by hurricanes for any short- or long-term damage or inaccessibility to healthcare and other emergency assistance facilities.
5. Based on FEMA's experience during the 2017 hurricane season, what steps is the agency taking to further reduce the time it takes to provide relief to hurricane-affected regions?
6. To respond to a large number of natural disasters in 2017, including Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, many FEMA employees were required to work overtime. Federal law, however, caps the amount of overtime, or "premium pay," that executive branch employees can receive annually. As a result, a number of FEMA employees were faced with the possibility that their hard-earned overtime would be clawed back or withheld.<sup>14</sup> Congress chose to retroactively lift federal overtime caps in 2017 for FEMA employees

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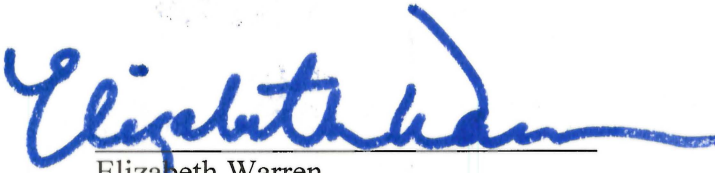
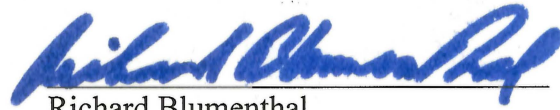

<sup>13</sup> Oxfam America, "Without electricity of the internet, how can Puerto Ricans get FEMA help by a looming deadline?" (October 23, 2017) (online at: <https://firstperson.oxfamamerica.org/2017/10/without-electricity-or-the-internet-how-can-puerto-ricans-get-fema-help-by-a-looming-deadline/>)

<sup>14</sup> Josh Eidelson, "FEMA Tells Staffers They Might Get Billed for Working Too Much," *Bloomberg Politics* (December 5, 2017) (online at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-12-05/fema-tells-staffers-they-might-get-billed-for-working-too-much>).

who fought natural disasters in 2017<sup>15</sup>—but if FEMA employees face a similarly active hurricane season in 2018, they could face similar limitations on overtime pay. Please provide a description of how FEMA is planning to address the provision of overtime payments for additional relief work, following issues during this most recent hurricane season associated with federal premium pay caps and worker compensation.<sup>16</sup>

7. The world will continue to experience more severe weather events due to climate change. What steps is FEMA taking to prepare proactively for this increase in severe weather events? Does the agency believe it has adequate funding to scale up its response to natural disasters as severe weather events increase?
8. Please provide a description of how FEMA is planning to address the provision of federal emergency contractors, following reports<sup>17</sup> of multiple FEMA contractors failing to deliver lifesaving assistance to hurricane victims and the opening of an official review by the Department of Homeland Security Inspector General's Office of FEMA's contracting processes.

Sincerely,

  
Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator  
Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator  
Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator

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<sup>15</sup> Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018, (online at:

<https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Bipartisan%20Budget%20Act%20of%202018.pdf>)

<sup>16</sup> Josh Eidelson, "FEMA Tells Staffers They Might Get Billed for Working Too Much," *Bloomberg Politics* (December 5, 2017) (online at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-12-05/fema-tells-staffers-they-might-get-billed-for-working-too-much>).

<sup>17</sup> Tami Abdollah, "AP Exclusive: Big contracts, no storm tarps for Puerto Rico," *Associated Press* (November 28, 2017) (online at: <https://www.apnews.com/cbeff1a939324610b7a02b88f30eafbb>); Patricia Mazzei and Agustin Armendariz, "FEMA Contract Called for 30 Million Meals for Puerto Ricans, 50,000 were Delivered.," *New York Times* (February 6, 2018) (online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/06/us/fema-contract-puerto-rico.html>)