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TESTIMONY
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ON

The current status of the United States emergency management and
disaster preparedness

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Introduction

Thank you Chairman Landrieu, Ranking Member Senator Coats, and distinguished members of the Committee, for inviting me here today to provide you with a large local community's perspective of the current status of emergency management in our country. I am Ron Lane, Director of Emergency Services for the County of San Diego and a participant in the Big City Emergency Managers' Group. My testimony today is framed in the context of the two major firestorms that have devastated the San Diego region over the past eight years, and the continued vigilance and preparedness needed knowing that there could be another firestorm the next time the Santa Ana winds blow.

San Diego County is a community of over 3.1 million residents, comprised of 18 cities and a large unincorporated area. The County is large geographically with its land size roughly equivalent to the State of Connecticut. San Diego County is landlocked with the Pacific Ocean to the West, border with Mexico to the South and a desert to the East. We have several large military bases, a nuclear power plant, the world's busiest international land border crossing, and several stadiums and amusement parks. All of these attributes which make San Diego a great place to live also factor into our mutual effort to ensure San Diego is safe and prepared for both natural and manmade disasters. Preparedness in such a large and diverse community is only achievable through a sophisticated level of coordination, communication and efficient application of resources. We have all heard the axiom "all disasters are local", but in reality, all disasters start local, but very quickly require state and federal assistance. Emergency Management is very much a team sport, and only through tremendous coordination at all levels of government can an effective disaster response and recovery be achieved. In my remarks today, I will highlight how the federal investment in local disaster preparedness and homeland security has been invaluable, and how this continued partnership is positioned to ensure that our nation continues to achieve its preparedness goals.

Local Community Resilience

The San Diego region is exposed to many potential natural disaster risks including a year round fire season and dispositions for earthquakes or tsunamis. San Diego is also exposed to manmade or terrorist threats the region's proximity to an International border, numerous military facilities, and a nuclear power plant. The frequency of major disasters in San Diego has emphasized the need to focus on community resilience. Achieving resilience in a local community, however, requires efforts from all levels of government as well as businesses, local organizations and citizens. I define resilience as the sum of three key components: 1) the number of first responders, and their capability to effectively divert from their day-to-day duties to disaster response; 2) the specific and dedicated emergency management capability, and; 3) the civil preparedness of our residents.

- 1. First Responders:** San Diego invests hundreds of millions of local dollars each year in public safety and fields over 5,000 law enforcement, firefighter, and Emergency Medical System (EMS) personnel. At the time of a disaster or act of terrorism, these first responders become our key initial response capability. Unfortunately, in the past, most first responders did not have the training, experience or equipment to most effectively respond to major emergencies. The Homeland Security Grant program has dramatically changed this equation. Over the past several years, the San Diego region has used Homeland Security Grant funds to conduct hundreds of training programs on everything from anti-terrorism to hazard materials, and from incident management to mass casualty response. We have conducted four regional full-scale exercises and dozens of functional exercises. Additionally, using federal grant funds, we have equipped our first responders with the personal protection equipment, decontamination trailers, detection equipment and robust communication equipment needed for an effective initial response to a catastrophic event. Bottom line: the federal investment in this area has effectively leveraged the local investment in our public safety and has resulted in a tremendously enhanced disaster response capability. This is an excellent example of the federal-local partnership and how federal investment can be a force multiplier to dramatically increase local capability.
- 2. Emergency Management Capability:** In addition to the traditional first responders, a community needs to maintain a robust and dedicated emergency management and homeland security capability. Largely through the Emergency Management Preparedness Grants (EMPG) and Homeland Security Grants, the region maintains significant emergency management capability, including; a state-of-the-art Emergency Operations Center; a series of plans addressing mitigation, evacuation, recovery, and continuity of operations issues; and, caches of critical shelter supplies. The region tests our plans by conducting regular exercises, training and coordination activities. The region has also implemented sophisticated mass notification systems and an emergency management information system. The region's 24-hour Staff Duty Officer Program is another critical function that is largely funded through

EMPG. In San Diego, we have one of the nation's 72 Law Enforcement fusion centers, and this center was developed and is maintained with joint local, state and federal staff and funding. The fusion center includes the Joint Terrorism Task Force and several intelligence analysts, and is the focal point of our region's local prevention activities. The fusion center serves as a conduit of two-way information and analysis between the street level personnel and all levels of the national intelligence network. While the very basic and core elements of emergency management and homeland security capabilities in our community are funded with local funds, the majority of the enhanced activities have been funded through federal investments. Again, a relatively small federal investment has provided significant and meaningful increase in our community's preparedness in the San Diego region.

- 3. Civil Preparedness:** The 2007 San Diego Firestorm burned 369,000 acres, destroyed over 1,600 homes, resulted in 10 deaths, and forced the evacuation of over 500,000 people. The narrative of the 2007 wildfires is replete with stories of neighbors helping neighbors during the evacuation; of businesses voluntarily providing cots, food and water to shelters; of animal rescue workers saving horses and livestock; of college students volunteering at the Qualcomm Stadium mega-shelter; and the list goes on and on. One of the key observations from the 2007 wildfires is that a disaster response is not just a government response, but rather, a community response. We wholeheartedly support Administrator Fugate's "whole community" initiative, as the resiliency of a community is truly tied to the civil preparedness and spirit of the community as a whole. While help and leadership from citizens, businesses and organizations will seemingly spontaneously emerge where needed in disasters, there is much that can be done pre-disaster to establish conditions for these emergent groups to be as successful as possible. Civil preparedness, in this context, not only means that individual citizens and families have taken basic disaster preparedness steps. True civil preparedness also means that families and businesses have taken pro-active steps to mitigate the most likely danger in their area (e.g. wildfires and earthquakes). Support of neighborhood and community programs like the Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT), Business Emergency Response Teams, and community Fire Safe Councils has proven instrumental in increasing community resilience—one neighborhood, one small community at a time. It is equally important to establish coordination and preparedness with other key community stakeholders. In San Diego, we have a very active Business Alliance with over 300 participating businesses. The Alliance ensures that businesses are provided key training pre-disaster and vital information during a disaster, and also serves as a resource for government to obtain critical resources. We have equivalent partnerships with the military and universities in the area. In the end, the more that is done to ensure all elements of the community are included and coordinated with, the more resilient the community will be.

How can the federal government support the building of resilient local communities?

Accepting the premise of a resilient community outlined above, the federal government policy and funding is critical in assisting local communities achieve resilience, which in turn strengthens our overall national preparedness.

1. Balance Prevention, Mitigation, Response and Recovery Efforts.

While most resources and effort goes to promote prevention and response activities, there is much that can be done in the mitigation and recovery realms that can make a meaningful difference. In San Diego, significant mitigation efforts were conducted after the 2003 wildfires. These included local changes to building codes (e.g. fire resistant roofs in high risk areas), as well as the use of over \$55 million in federal funds to remove dead, dying and diseased trees near roads and buildings, and to conduct brush management. These types of mitigation efforts made a monumental impact in limiting the severity of the even more powerful firestorm to strike our region again just four years later.

Likewise, San Diego has implemented an “advanced recovery” initiative to take actions pre-disaster to accelerate recovery after a catastrophic event. This initiative is comprised of four key components of recovery: 1) helping individual citizens recover, 2) restoring community lifelines, 3) rebuilding the community fabric, and 4) readying a trained workforce to conduct recovery activities in our county. The goal is to make recovery from a disaster more efficient, rapid and effective through advanced planning of recovery activities long before disaster strikes. Included in this effort are pre-qualification of debris-removal contracts, pre-planning of Local Assistance Centers, and plans to understand and mitigate the interdependencies of electrical power, water, communication, hospital, and transportation systems.

Actions taken by FEMA and through federal grants that incent and support community efforts in the mitigation and “advanced” recovery realm would be helpful to balancing the nation’s preparedness efforts.

2. Foster Effective Communication Systems

In a local response, the ability to communicate is fundamental to success. In San Diego, we focus on two separate communication systems—internal agency communications and public communications.

The radio system used by first responders in their day-to-day operations is the radio system that will be primarily used during a disaster. Fortunately, the many different cities and agencies in San Diego long ago took a regional approach to communications, and developed a “regional” 800MHz communication system. By having over 200 different agencies, from city fire departments to university police departments, all sharing a common system, ensuring we have a capability to communicate effectively during disasters. However, unquestionably, communication systems are costly to operate and maintain, and expensive periodic upgrades are required. For example, during our 2003 wildfires, we identified that our communication systems towers located

throughout our back country were vulnerable to the wildfires. San Diego County invested over \$20 million to upgrade our communication infrastructure, and build in needed redundancy. This investment paid off, as no significant communication issues occurred, even though 19 separate transmitter sites were damaged/destroyed by the fire. San Diego has spent a significant portion of our Homeland Security Grants on our communication systems, and conversion to the new P25 standard will require continued investment in upcoming years.

A second key component of our internal communications is our emergency management information system. Through this internet-based system, we have connected over 300 agencies, including all local responding agencies as well as our state and federal partners. This information system provides real-time situational awareness between all agencies, and proved invaluable during the 2007 Firestorm. Despite the tremendous capabilities we have in our primary communication systems, the very nature of disaster response requires the need for redundant back-up systems. We have several back-up contingency systems, ranging from the latest technology in satellite phones, to the 1950's technology of the ham radio operators.

The second critical communication channel is our ability to communicate with the public during a disaster. For the wildfires, we made over 415,000 calls directly to our citizens homes through our public mass notification system, AlertSanDiego. This allowed us to conduct the nation's largest fire evacuation expeditiously and without major incident. This system is vitally important because it allows us to call the home phones of those in danger to give them critical information about evacuations, etc. We also allow residents to register cell phones. We currently have around 300,000 cell phones registered. Ultimately, I believe the best solution for public communication is the cell broadcast capability being developed under the Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS) program. While the current mass notification to home landline phones is currently a viable capability, the country is fast becoming a wireless nation. Already, our analysis shows that over 17% of the homes in San Diego do not have a landline phone. Further, the CMAS capability will allow us to not only communicate to the homes, but also to contact citizens in their cars while they are evacuating, as well as to notify them on their cell phone when it is safe to return home. San Diego did a FEMA-sponsored test of this project last year and look forward to its roll out in the upcoming months. For this system to be valuable to local agencies, however, it is important that the system be designed to be managed at the "cell tower" level. Early discussions indicated that alerts would be controlled at the county level. While this may work in some states, where counties are relatively small, it would not be feasible in states like California. The true value in CMAS will be the ability to identify an area that is threatened or impacted by an emergency, and to contact the cell phones only in that immediate area.

In summary, the communities in the San Diego area have invested tens of millions of dollars in our public safety communication systems. Through federal Homeland Security grants, we have enhanced and hardened this day-to-day capability into a robust disaster

response capability. Sustaining and upgrading the systems will require significant continued investment.

3. Assist in Creating a “Culture of Preparedness”

FEMA’s “whole community” effort is vitally important and should be supported and enhanced. Ultimately, to truly create a culture where our citizens make preparedness for disasters a priority, the effort must begin with our school-aged children. The Local, State, Tribal and Federal Preparedness Task Force provided a recommendation that preparedness materials and education should be integrated into educational curricula. While this recommendation requires state and local school district support, any national recognition of the importance of preparedness is helpful.

4. Implement the National Preparedness System

It is with great anticipation that we look forward to the implementation of the National Preparedness System that is being developed in accordance with Presidential Preparedness Directive 8. From a local perspective, the key to success in this effort will be the close coordination between all levels of government, as envisioned in the recommendations of the Local, State, Tribal and Federal Preparedness Task Force in their report to Congress last fall. While there are a number of ways to implement a National Preparedness System, I believe the starting point must be a Threat and Hazard Identification/Risk Assessment (THIRA). Like many large communities, as part of Hazard Mitigation Plan process, as well as our Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) security strategy plan, San Diego has developed a very accurate THIRA in which measure our gaps and capabilities. The integration of these local and state THIRAs with the national and multi-state THIRA process currently underway by FEMA will provide an excellent benchmark and index on which to build the National Preparedness System. As discussed, our mutual efforts post 9/11 have resulted in San Diego having a tremendous capability to successfully conduct prevention and an initial response to a disaster or terrorist attack. We have also developed significant capability that is readily available to assist other communities who suffer a catastrophe. Through the National Preparedness System process, it is hopeful that both community preparedness gaps, as well as the capabilities each community has available to assist others in need, can be identified. From a local perspective, the end result of the National Preparedness System will be: 1) an accurate analysis of the threats and risks throughout the nation (at the local, state and national level); 2) an assessment of where federal investment can best be used to mitigate these threat and risks (i.e. link the THIRA to grant investment justification process); and, of critical importance, 3) an in-depth analysis of the “seams” between local, state and federal response capabilities for each region, and identification on how capabilities and resources can be shared and allocated to meet gaps.

5. Evolution of the Homeland Security Grant Programs

As discussed above, federal EMPG and Homeland Security grants have played a critical role in the evolution of preparedness at the local level. Local governments have been able to build upon their local funding investment in public safety and leverage federal

funds to significantly improve preparedness. As we approach the 10 year anniversary of 9/11, and we take stock of the evolution of preparedness that has occurred over the past decade, it is entirely fitting that the various grant programs should be reviewed. Changes in the grant programs should be made to reflect the changes in budgets, risks, threats and preparedness improvements that have taken place. From a local perspective, we are hopeful that any changes to the grant programs consider:

- a. Sustainment. While many grant programs were one-time equipment purchases, most major improvements funded by the grants require ongoing sustainment, or the gains made would be lost. For example, the ongoing funding of intelligence analysts is critical to maintaining the value of the fusion center investment. Ongoing training and exercises are necessary, as are quadrennial updates of key plans and operations.
- b. Flexibility. At this point, most communities have conducted fairly extensive risk analysis, and understand their most critical gaps in relation to their greatest risks. If grant funding is to decrease over time, a corresponding increase in flexibility in how funds are spent would help mitigate some of the impact.

Conclusion

The federal investment in support of local homeland security and emergency management over the past several years has paid tremendous dividends in the overall preparedness of our nation.

I appreciate opportunities, like this one, to share and exchange ideas. Thank you for your interest in the San Diego region, for your support of local disaster preparedness activities, and for providing the County of San Diego the opportunity to participate in today's hearing. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.