FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell's Remarks to the 2021 IAEM Conference

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Thank you, it’s great to be here.

I’d like to express my gratitude to IAEM President Judd Freed for inviting me to speak today. I’d also like to congratulate incoming IAEM President Carolyn Harshman on her new role with the association.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a remarkable challenge for all of us and these past two years have been nothing short of historic. When I look across this room, I am so proud to be a part of the emergency management field.

For all of us, the days have been long, the stakes high, and the sacrifices great. We’ve all been stretched and tested by COVID – in addition to the other historic disasters we’ve faced since the beginning of 2020.

Our field is undergoing immense change, but one thing remains constant: Our unending commitment to the people we serve. We’re facing greater risks and a changing society, which means our role is evolving.

As we move into the future, we’re going to need to leverage all the lessons we’ve learned from COVID – those lessons of connectivity, creativity, and most of all, adaptability.

Our biggest risk – that of climate change – is greater and deadlier than any other hazard we’ve faced. Simply put: Our field must adapt the way we do business if we’re going to make the changes that will protect our communities now and in the future.

While I’m with you today, I’d like to focus on three things.

First – Discuss in stark terms how climate change is transforming the disaster landscape.

Second – Share the ways FEMA is charting a course to combat climate change.

And third – How the role of the emergency manager is more important than ever.

So, first – climate change. It's easy to get lost within the scope, scale, and complexities of climate change.

It seems like every day there's a new report with statistics, predictions, and alarming trends. And – for some of you – it can be difficult to translate those big, global numbers into real risks for your communities.

Every place is experiencing the effects of climate change differently, but what we're seeing across the board is the increase in severe weather.

Raise your hand if you never thought your community would be vulnerable to a historic flooding event, severe storms, tornados, or wildfire.

Now, raise your hand if your community has been recently affected by a historic flooding event, severe storms, tornados, or a wildfire.

Across the country – and around the world – our communities are now facing hazards that have been historically low-probability events. The impacts are greater, do more damage, and last longer.

For example, there's Hurricane Ida.

Ida's wind speeds intensified from 85 to 150 miles per hour in less than 24 hours, due to abnormally warm waters in the Gulf of Mexico. When it came ashore, it retained much of its strength as it crossed over nine states in four days – leaving a path of damage from the Gulf Coast to New England.

And on the opposite side of the country, we're seeing the impacts of climate change through wildfire behavior – those of you from out West know that each year brings another historic fire season. Wildfires are spreading faster and burning longer than before, devastating communities, and disrupting lives.

This past summer, I visited the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. At that time, the NIFC had just elevated to preparedness level 5 – the highest level of wildland fire activity – which was the earliest that level had been reached in the

past decade.

While there, we looked at maps that tracked where wildfires were actively burning across the western United States. It was almost impossible to see the state lines due to the number of markers spread across the screen.

The breadth and scale of these wildfires is astonishing. As of September, over 44,000 wildfires had burned nearly 5.3 million acres nationwide, roughly the size of the state of New Jersey.

In California, more than 2.2 million acres have burned this year – the Dixie fire alone burned nearly 1 million acres. And in less than a month, the Caldor fire wiped out more than 200,000 acres and 1,000 structures.

The wildfires we're now seeing – these long-duration, massive fires occurring each year – prove there's no such thing as a "wildfire season" anymore. Each complex, costly, and critical wildfire year underscores the nation's need to recommit resources to fire prevention, preparedness, and response.

Because of climate change, the demand for resources and personnel are only going to grow. In the past decade, we've seen disaster costs skyrocket.

Last year, there were 22 weather and climate-related disasters with losses exceeding $1 billion in the United States. This shattered the previous annual record of 16 billion-dollar events in 2011 and 2017. And in total, extreme weather cost America $99 billion dollars in 2020.

This summer, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report stating that some of the trends we're seeing are already irreversible. They fittingly called the report "Code Red".

Another recent study found that if the planet continues to warm on its current trajectory, the average 6-year-old will live through roughly three times as many climate disasters as their grandparents.

Raise your hand if you have grandkids.

So do I. We cannot forget that future generations, like our grandkids, will have to live with the consequences of our actions today.

Climate change is the crisis of our generation and future generations are depending on us to make our communities stronger and more resilient.

So how do we do that? Everyone in this room knows tackling climate change is not easy – it's complex, it takes resources, and it requires a commitment to long-term planning and investment.

From his first day in office, President Biden made clear that under his leadership, the federal government will take aggressive action to combat the climate crisis.

The administration set ambitious goals to help those hit hardest by climate impacts, to invest in resilient infrastructure, and to cut emissions and reduce pollution.

When I came onboard at FEMA in April, I asked my team to be bold and innovative as we make climate change a top priority for the Agency.

Many of you know we're in the middle of developing our next 5-year Strategic Plan. One of the three overarching goals will be to lead the whole of community in climate resilience.

This means understanding climate change's impact so we can better anticipate the unique challenges in front of us. It means investing in the data, tools, and resources to help us make decisions about the risks, threats, and hazards that stem from climate change.

And it means supporting you with your climate adaptation investments through FEMA's grant programs while promoting risk-reduction measures, like building codes.

As we're working through the Strategic Plan, I'm asking myself and my team at FEMA some fundamental questions:

How are other sectors advancing solutions to climate change? Are we having conversations with cross government and cross sector partners who are already working in this space? Where are the gaps in knowledge and resources? And what disaster mitigation projects fill the void?

To answer some of these questions, we stood up a Climate Steering Group, which is dedicated to developing a holistic, unified Agency approach for considering and addressing the impacts of climate change.

This group is actively engaged with hundreds of FEMA subject matter experts and leadership across the country to identify opportunities, barriers, and actions for tackling the climate crisis.

And most recently, in coordination with the White House Office of Science, Technology and Policy and NOAA, FEMA is helping to develop an action-oriented plan that will chart a course for expanding accessibility and use of the federal government's climate information to support all communities, including those who have been historically underserved, to inform climate planning and resilience activities.

We've also secured some major wins with our Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities – our BRIC – program and our Hazard Mitigation funding already this year.

We were able to get $3.46 billion in Hazard Mitigation funding through the COVID declarations. And this followed an additional $1 billion in BRIC dollars, which is twice what was available last year.

These are big dollars that will fund system-level, major investments that will allow your communities to tackle larger projects – projects that will have greater impacts and a bigger return on investment.

And to complement the increased amount of funding for our communities, we're also working harder to encourage state and local leaders to adopt and enforce building codes. Hazard-resistant building codes are a low-cost, high-impact solution that can help break cycles of disaster damage and reconstruction.

However, 68% of communities across the country have not adopted the latest building codes. This increases the risk for the people that live in these communities.

A 2019 study by the National Institute of Building Sciences found that adopting the latest building codes saves eleven dollars for every dollar invested. And as our risks expand, this investment only becomes more valuable.

Investing in the future through mitigation projects is the bedrock of emergency management. Mitigation and building codes work. Time and time again we see tangible results.

For example, some of you may remember Tropical Storm Allison that came ashore in Houston in 2001. After that storm, the Texas Medical Center invested in mitigation measures to ensure the hospital could remain open and operational during future storms.

And, almost 20 years later, they were able to stay open during Hurricane Harvey, providing desperately needed medical assistance to thousands of residents impacted by flooding.

This is a powerful example of not only the operational benefit of mitigation, but the long-term, sustained impact mitigation can have for a community.

We all know this – I know I'm preaching to the choir. But I can commit to you that FEMA will continue to push for additional mitigation money for our communities, as well as advocate for the adoption of the latest building codes across the country.

Mitigation and building codes save lives and reduce disaster suffering, but flood insurance is just as important. To that end, at the beginning of this month, we rolled out our Risk Rating 2.0 initiative.

This initiative is a leap forward for our National Flood Insurance Program. Our rating methodology hasn't changed in more than 40 years and it certainly has not included risks from climate change.

Our new methodology enables FEMA to set flood insurance rates that are in-line with the risks our policy holders face. Our rates should be fair. Policyholders with lower-valued homes should not be paying more and policy holders with higher-valued homes should not be paying less.

With Risk Rating 2.0, FEMA now has the tools to address rating disparities by incorporating more flood risk variables. These include flood frequency, multiple flood types, distance to a water source, and property characteristics such as elevation and the cost to rebuild.

We're excited about these changes and what it will mean for bolstering resilience in communities across America. Flood insurance is one of the most powerful tools we have for mitigating future losses from our most frequent disasters – losses that will only increase because of climate change.

Our efforts to modernize the NFIP are part of the broader strategy at FEMA to look toward the future and recognize the complexity of the risk landscape.

There are many dimensions of mitigation and each of you have unique challenges and resources within your communities and organizations. The best mitigation projects are those that come from the ground up, where those projects reflect the values and priorities of the community.

FEMA.gov has a suite of tools and resources to help with data analysis, mapping, risk assessments, and planning. Our goal is to provide as much assistance as possible to support you and your communities' mitigation efforts on the ground.

We also understand not every community may have the resources to apply for federal mitigation funding. That's why we've increased our technical assistance to help underserved communities. It's on us to make sure our resources are being delivered and accessed equitably.

I know you and your teams are already taking a leading role in guiding communities toward our resources – and the others that are out there from the public and private sectors.

Now I'm asking you to increase the urgency of your mitigation efforts– and not just those funded by FEMA. We must start now if we're going to build nationwide resilience.

No matter what type of projects you're pursuing – building codes, buy outs, land use planning, hazard analysis, community education, or strengthening your infrastructure – they will take time.

We have an opportunity now – as we're seeing climate change play out in our backyards and on our televisions – to push mitigation projects forward.

It's on us to be the champions of mitigation and advocate for these projects with mayors, city council members, county officials, and other political leaders. The

window of opportunity is open for us. Now is the time to advocate for what we need to strengthen our communities and build a more resilient nation.

Finally, before I close, I want to touch on our evolving role as emergency managers.

We've been through a lot together during the pandemic. We've supported one another and helped each other through the crisis.

And what I saw – not just with my team but from the entire emergency management community – was the ability to adapt to whatever situation we were in.

We were able to adapt and find solutions to problem-sets that hadn't even been considered before. This is a skill set that is unique to our profession.

Emergency managers can look at a crisis, break it down, prioritize resources, collaborate with others, and solve problems. We can get outcomes when others cannot.

And considering the challenges facing our country right now, emergency managers are needed now more than ever. Climate change is just one set of hazards. Many of you are seeing your role expand to include other problem sets, like the opioid crisis, homelessness, or social unrest.

Our role is expanding, and the risks are changing. I have no doubt we're up to the challenge and we'll face the future head on. But we also need to recognize that some things need to change.

Notably, we need more voices in emergency management, especially those who represent underserved communities. Certain populations are disproportionately affected by disasters and its incumbent on us to take steps to address that.

We can do that by hiring a more diverse workforce, by reaching out to traditionally underserved communities, and by integrating equity in the work we do. More voices mean better results. And we need to broaden who we are as a field if we're going to get the results we need in an increasingly uncertain future.

I've tasked my team at FEMA to integrate equity into our FEMA programs and our HR practices, which will make us a stronger agency that's more responsive to those who need us the most.

And I'm encouraging you do the same. Our strength as a field depends on our ability to serve – and to do that, we need to invite in those we do not yet know and rethink the ways we work with our most steadfast partners.

We need to broaden our reach and stretch our coordination across more organizations and neighborhoods. We need to leverage the lessons of the past, while also looking toward the future.

None of this will be easy, but if you wanted easy, you wouldn't be in this room.

Throughout the last year, we saw – and continue to see – emergency managers doing what they do best: being ready, being adaptable, demonstrating resilience and serving humbly. There are not many places where we can find people like you.

I'm so proud to be a part of this profession. Thank you for the tremendous work you do each day to make our field stronger and our communities more resilient. The future will be better because of who you are and what we can all achieve together.

Thank you.