

# FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell's Remarks to the Western Governors' Association 2021 Winter Meeting

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Good Morning!

I'd like to thank the Western Governors' Association for inviting me to join you today.

I want to recognize our fantastic hosts, Idaho Governor and WGA Chair Little, Colorado Governor and WGA Vice Chair Polis.

And thank you to Governor Cox for moderating today's session, and to WGA Executive Director James Ogsbury for your leadership.

Finally, I'd like to recognize Secretary Haaland for the outstanding work she does for not only the Interior Department, but for being such a great partner to FEMA.

I commend all of you for your leadership in navigating disasters and emergencies over the last year as this is something that I know we have collectively faced and had to overcome.

As this is my first time speaking to this group, I'd like to take this opportunity to introduce myself to you.

Since joining FEMA as the Administrator in April, I've had the honor to witness some of the incredible efforts put forth by state and local leaders to help communities prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters.

Much of this room contributed to that work, and I'd like to thank you.

Like many of you, I've dedicated most of my career to public service. We know this work is not easy, and it's not always popular. But it is fulfilling, it is rewarding, and it truly does make a difference.



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My career in emergency management began out West at the Aurora Fire Department in Colorado.

I was fortunate to serve a diverse community full of kind people, beautiful landscapes, and rich history. We were a hard-working team of three emergency managers responsible for serving the third-largest city in Colorado. Because of this experience, I am familiar with the unique challenges local officials face with limited resources.

COVID-19 has magnified just how limited the resources are in some communities across the nation.

In response to this, President Biden announced that FEMA funding to support all eligible COVID-19 work will continue at a 100% federal cost share through April 1 of 2022.

This support has allowed States to continue focusing on the dynamic response needs COVID-19 has required. And FEMA will continue our commitment to work with you to help fill the gaps you may be experiencing.

Additionally, States will be retroactively reimbursed for FEMA-eligible services – including PPE, emergency feeding actions, sheltering at risk populations, as well as mobilization of the National Guard – back dated to the beginning of the pandemic in January 2020.

We know the fight against COVID-19 has had devastating impacts on your states, and we are working hard to do our part in supporting your response and recovery efforts.

As leaders of western urban centers, dispersed rural populations, tribal nations, and immigrant communities, you see the unique needs and risks your states are colliding with, and becoming exacerbated by, the effects of climate change.

Droughts, wildfires, mudslides, earthquakes, flooding, along with COVID-19 have all hit way too close to home — too many times. And each of you have been at the forefront of responding.

Large cities in the **Pacific Northwest** faced unprecedented heat domes this past summer and are now impacted by severe flooding caused by ‘atmospheric rivers.’



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The **West Coast** was in desperate need of reprieve from fires, yet the arrival of rain only prompted burn scars to give way to mud slides.

Our **Mountain States** are fighting fires year-round that transcend state lines and quickly deplete resources.

**Pacific U.S. Territories** are facing the existential threats of climate change from extremely remote locations, posing unique challenges in securing resources to protect their communities.

And just this week, **Hawaii's** forecast included up to 25 inches of rain, a foot of mountain snow, and hurricane-force winds on the summits of the Big Island, and a rare blizzard warning was issued for Mauna Kea.

Regardless of what comes next, know this...your actions are critical. They inform how we bolster national-level preparedness efforts, promote equitable distribution of resources and information, implement mitigation efforts, and advance climate resilience.

### **Climate Change Impacts to States**

Climate change has undoubtedly transformed your roles as Governors.

Your communities are weary; your first responders are stretched; your emergency managers are making difficult choices about how to find and deploy resources; and you as leaders are faced with making decisions based on an evolving climate situation.

I visited some of you this summer and saw the catastrophic consequences that disasters have dealt your communities.

You have spoken to families who fled a fast-spreading wildfire only to return to what little was left of their homes.

You have watched firefighters stare down a wall of fire with astonishing bravery, strapped for equipment and working against impossible odds.

You have seen the crops of a lifelong farmer wither in the heat with not enough water to save them.



And you have witnessed communities pull together and persevere only to find a lack of resources to distribute.

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to visit the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho where I was briefed on how fires are arriving earlier, moving faster, and burning longer.

In fact, at the time, the National Interagency Fire Center 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 increasingly repetitive and widespread wildfires are a stark reminder of the havoc climate change has created for our country.

As of November, seven million acres have been burned by nearly 51,000 fires.

The consequences are far-reaching: unemployment, short-term to long-term displacement, irretrievable economic and personal losses, even homelessness.

And AccuWeather predictions estimate possible damages of the 2021 wildfire season to be somewhere between \$70 and \$90 billion dollars.

Additionally, a 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.

This new reality begs the question, “What can we do now to make a difference in our future and help communities adapt to climate change?”

Unfortunately, I believe this is our new normal.

## **Infrastructure Bill and Mitigation**

President Biden has made the response to climate change a national call to action. He heard you, we heard you, and we know that without immediate action,



we will leave future generations with irreversible repercussions.

This is our moment to change the trajectory, and we must seize it. We must work together to create strong, resilient, and prepared communities.

The President's recent signing of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act includes \$6.8 Billion for FEMA to help communities address climate change through vitally needed mitigation projects.

It also establishes a new Cybersecurity Grant program to further safeguard critical infrastructure.?

The funding will specifically strengthen our ability to deliver programs like Building Resilience Infrastructure and Communities or BRIC, dam safety, cyber security, flood mitigation assistance, and a new tool – the STORM Act which stands for Safeguarding Tomorrow through Ongoing Risk Mitigation – which provides revolving hazard mitigation loans to states and tribal governments.

At FEMA, we take our role to educate government partners on the benefits of mitigation seriously. We know mitigation projects can be complex, costly, and lengthy, often leaving communities to ask themselves, “Is all this paperwork and time really worth it?”

I'm here to tell you the answer is yes.

For example, last month the City of Mount Vernon in Washington experienced a major rain event that caused the Skagit River to crest at almost 37 feet— the second worst flooding in Mount Vernon since 1990.

Fortunately, home and business owners were saved from catastrophic flooding because of a flood wall that the city completed in 2018. This is a testament to the power of mitigation, a modern-day success story we should be inspired by, and share far and wide.

And in Utah, FEMA is partnering with the state on a risk reduction strategy guide for communities with unreinforced masonry structures that are especially susceptible to damage from earthquakes.



This is an example of collaboration across government; a way we can work together to protect communities with existing and identified risks.

## **Hazard Mitigation Grant Program**

A cornerstone of FEMA's investment in supporting mitigation efforts is through our Hazard Mitigation Grant Program.

In August, the Biden-Harris Administration announced a significant investment in climate resiliency by authorizing \$3.46 billion for the 59 major disaster declarations issued due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is the largest HMGP funding allocation in FEMA's history and will help communities across the nation take steps to foster greater resilience and reduce disaster suffering.

## **FMA and BRIC**

Our Hazard Mitigation Grant Programs also includes the Flood Mitigation Assistance Program, or FMA, and our Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program, or BRIC.

First, our Flood Mitigation Assistance grant program helps government entities reduce or eliminate the risk of repetitive flood damage to buildings insured under the National Flood Insurance Program.

Second, our BRIC program seeks to categorically shift the federal focus from reactive disaster spending toward research-supported, proactive investment in community resilience.

BRIC is FEMA's way forward in the business of mitigation.

In the BRIC program's second year, a total of \$1 billion in mitigation funding is available for the next fiscal cycle – double the amount from last year.

We've also increased the tribal set-aside by an additional \$5 million, from \$20 million to \$25 million.



This funding will help meet the ongoing demand for hazard mitigation across the nation and will enhance FEMA's efforts to deliver benefits to disadvantaged communities.

We know under-resourced communities have fewer opportunities to invest in large scale mitigation efforts. Yet, they are most adversely affected by cascading weather events.

One of our most important roles is to help underserved and vulnerable local jurisdictions assess their risks and hazards so they can be proactive when funding opportunities come up.

That's why we're working hard, through efforts like Direct Technical Assistance, to provide support for both project and application-specific needs, as well as community-wide resilience needs.

Support that includes help such as developing a project involving collaboration between multiple communities.

This type of collaboration will help build a shared understanding of resilience across local government departments.

Bring stakeholders together to discuss innovative mitigation solutions.

And identify partnership opportunities or establish a local mitigation partnership network.

It is our responsibility as state and national leaders to empower local communities to implement mitigation actions, to practice preparedness year-round, and to work together to help implement climate adaptation plans that are equitable for all communities.

Governors, you are some of our best messengers in this effort because you know the unique needs of your states.

## **Preparedness**

I also believe there are incredibly important investments in the preparedness space we can make to help communities persist, endure, and recover from



disasters.

Part of those investments include ensuring your constituents have the information needed to make informed decisions. We must remember that sometimes even seemingly simple preparedness asks can become monumental lifts for our communities.

The 2020 FEMA National Household Survey found that only 48% of American households have disaster preparedness plans.

This statistic underscores a common belief by many -- that their families and homes are immune from the impacts of a disaster, and so they fail to make plans until it is too late.

However, the fact is that every community, every neighborhood, is vulnerable to experiencing severe weather. So ultimately, how well communities prepare for a disaster today can significantly influence their ability to recover tomorrow.

As governors, you know that preparedness can't be a seasonal conversation or an afterthought. It can't be reinforced through sporadic public service announcements.

Community-wide resilience means starting with individual preparedness as a common theme – not just at the beginning of fire or flood season, but all year long.

There are tools and resources available right now to help you have informed preparedness conversations with your communities.

FEMA recently released our guide on climate resilience and climate adaptation that we believe will provide a roadmap for your communities as they navigate the future challenges presented by climate change and seek to deploy sustainable solutions.

Let's continue our work together to help western states become more resilient and illustrate how mitigation, built on a culture of preparedness, gives us our best chance of not just surviving climate consequences but reversing them.

## **Equity**





In July, while traveling in Oregon, I sat down with representatives of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde who spoke candidly about their challenges in gathering resources and developing strategies for future disaster response and recovery efforts.

After that conversation I wondered:

“Are we doing the best we can to inform communities about the help available to them?”

“Are we regularly engaging with underserved and vulnerable communities in meaningful ways.”

“Are we really listening?”

I believe resilient communities are those that feel heard, so it is our job as leaders to lean in and listen.

And through listening, we have received valued feedback about the way we deliver our programs.

We know there are disparities, differences in capacity, and that our programs are sometimes not easily accessible to those who need them.

I’ve had honest conversations with many of you in this room about this very issue, and your insights are valuable markers for us as we strive to partner with you and to better achieve FEMA’s mission through the lens of equity.

As a result of these conversations, we made changes to our Individual Assistance Program.

We now accept a broader range of ownership and occupancy documentation when applying for assistance – reducing the administrative burden to those whose homes have been passed down over the generations.

We amended our policy to aid those who suffered a disaster-related disability and now require special components to make their damaged home safe and functional.



And we've implemented a new formula for our direct housing program based on total square feet rather than a fixed amount – making it easier for people with smaller homes to become eligible for direct housing.

This is just the beginning. We still have work to do, and I am committed to continuing our efforts to put people first in everything we do.

## **Pivotal Time in our History: Strengthening FEMA's Programs through National Investment**

I've spoken a lot this morning about the evolving threats and challenges facing us as leaders. We are living in a time of great uncertainty. Amidst this uncertainty, however, is an acknowledgement of key actions that we know strengthen communities: investment in mitigation, research and funding for adaptation, and preparedness against future disasters and extreme weather events.

FEMA is acknowledging our role to strengthen communities through our Strategic Plan, which launches today. In it is a call to action for our Agency to advance equity, invest in resilience, and strengthen the partnerships that we know make a difference to individuals and communities across our nation.

We have identified three ambitious goals we must achieve to address these challenges and to ensure we continue to be the FEMA our nation needs and deserves.

Goal One, we must “**Instill Equity as a Foundation of Emergency Management** .” Systems that foster inequality serve no one, especially in times of crisis. We must recognize that disasters affect individuals and communities differently, commit ourselves to reducing barriers to access, and deliver equitable outcomes for all we serve.

Goal Two, we must “**Lead the Whole of Community in Climate Resilience.**” We must recognize that we are facing a climate crisis and educate ourselves, and the nation, about the impacts our changing climate pose to the field of emergency management.

We must integrate planning for future conditions, move away from incremental mitigation measures, and focus on large projects that protect infrastructure and community systems.



And Goal Three, we must “**Promote and Sustain a Ready FEMA and Prepared Nation.**” We must recognize that the demands on emergency managers will only continue to increase. We must lean into this as a shared responsibility to prepare the nation’s emergency managers and ready ourselves and the larger federal government to meet an expanding mission.

And our success can only be built in collaboration with all of you. This is a partnership.

When you share with us what works in your states, what is a best practice, how you interact with your stakeholders and develop messages, it helps inform our approach. Yes, our climate is changing, but so is our nation. We are more diverse than ever. We need to leverage our diversity as a strength to navigate the greatest challenge of our era.

I want to thank you again for the opportunity to be with you today, for our partnership and your leadership. We are clearly at a turning point. The actions we take now will have a tremendous impact on future generations, so it is imperative that we act with purpose and solidarity to adapt, become more resilient, and face the future with an optimism born from bold action.

We have time allotted for questions, and I hope you will also help answer some of my own.

Where have you seen return on investment from mitigation funding?

What best practices or strategies have you implemented to build resilience in your communities?

