

# FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell's Remarks at the NEMA Annual Meeting 2022

---

**Release Date: Oct 18, 2022**

Good morning, it is so great to be here with you all once again.

I would like to thank President Erica Bornemann for her leadership of the association, for hosting us in beautiful Vermont, and for inviting me to speak to you today.

Erica, it has been quite a year since we first had dinner in Burlington and discussed your perspective on Emergency Management and your vision for NEMA efforts during 2022. With your leadership, we have accomplished a great deal over the past 12 months — including some major policy changes, legislative wins, and, more importantly, active, thoughtful, and deliberate engagement between our organizations. Congratulations on a successful year as President!

And Patrick, I would also like to thank you for your partnership and support over the last year.

I am sorry my last trip to Tennessee got cut short, but I am looking forward to being back soon and working with you over the next year and building on Erica's legacy.

And my next message of thanks is to all of you. On behalf of all of us at FEMA, we thank you for your continued partnership and for helping us become the FEMA our nation needs and deserves.

Without NEMA, meeting our mission of helping people before, during, and after disasters would be nearly impossible.

I say that because it is your feedback, your insight, your perspectives, and yes, your constructive criticism, that continues to help shape the way we deliver our



assistance to better meet the needs of all people in, all communities

You also help us make our programs more accessible to our customers – from survivors, to communities, to non-profit partners.

I want you to know that your voices are valued, they matter, and they are needed now more than ever.

So, I commit to you that we will continue to lean forward alongside you with open ears and open minds. And we look forward to building upon this decades old partnership that is a pillar of our nation's emergency management enterprise.

## **2022 in Review**

Since we last met for the NEMA Mid-Year Meeting, it is fair to say that things have been a little busy. Our nation, your states and communities, have faced disasters that have rewritten history and forever changed the lives of millions.

This year alone we have already experienced:

- Six 1-in-1,000-year rainfall events, five within a five-week period and seven record flooding events, including in Montana where heavy rainfall combined with an early snowmelt destroyed homes, washed out roadways, moved rivers, and decimated the economies of the beloved cities and towns that welcome millions of visitors to Yellowstone Park every year.
- Nearly 7 million acres burned this wildfire season, with New Mexico experiencing the largest and most destructive fire in its history
- Extreme heat shattered over 7,000 records this summer with heatwaves occurring throughout the Pacific Northwest, Texas, and New England
- This heat has contributed to ongoing droughts in the western US. In August, nearly 50% of the country was experiencing drought conditions
- And of course, the last few weeks have seen Hurricanes and Typhoons make landfall with devastating impacts.

All together, these are the weather incidents that you have responded to just this year alone. These events account for 15 billion-dollar disasters in 2022, including the storms of the past few weeks.



This operational tempo is not unique to 2022. As you can see, the FEMA Public Assistance Program obligated as much money in the last four years as it did in the previous 18.

Just a few weeks ago, Hurricane Ian leveled entire communities spanning Florida's southwest barrier islands to areas well inland, displaced tens of thousands of people, and paved the way for a decades-long, multi-billion-dollar recovery. In response to Hurricane Ian, FEMA provided \$482 million dollars direct to survivors, many of whom have benefitted from our revised equity-focused policies.

I want to take a moment to recognize and thank the 29 states who deployed your best teams from across the country to support Florida during one of our nation's most challenging and tragic events. From the beginning, this has been a team effort across every level of government, and we could not meet this mission without you.

In the days prior to Ian, Hurricane Fiona gave Puerto Ricans still recovering from Hurricane Maria, whiplash. The lashing wind and rain caused farmers to lose years-worth of precious crops, roads were washed away and buried by mudslides, and the fragility of the island's critical infrastructure reemerged.

And Fiona was personal to FEMA. With hundreds of our employees local to the island, when she impacted Puerto Rico, she impacted us, too.

We know that Puerto Rico will now need to recover from Fiona on top of Hurricane Maria, but I can tell you that our dedicated teams, even as they are recovering themselves, are more determined than ever to help the commonwealth, and their own communities, build back more resilient to withstand future catastrophic events.

And just one day prior to Fiona making landfall, Typhoon Merbok ravaged 1,000 miles of Alaska's coastline, throwing rural and tribal communities into a race against time to make critical emergency repairs before the freeze-up and the start of Winter season.

That was just September.



Only weeks earlier, state, federal, non-profit and faith-based partners converged upon Jackson, Mississippi to help the city during its water crisis. A water crisis that didn't just manifest with a boil water order that lasted a few days but a water crisis that manifested as more than 150,000 people who – when they turned on their faucet – nothing came out. That was a lifesaving and life sustaining mission that was executed by one team of local, state, and federal agencies working toward one shared goal – getting the people of Jackson one of their most basic needs, water.

This was third FEMA operation this year that focused on water treatment and distribution systems. Monsoon-caused debris flows that followed the New Mexico Wildfires brought the City of Las Vegas, New Mexico within weeks of losing water service. And, in the “I didn't see that coming” department, was a major water treatment plant in the U.S. Virgin Islands being impacted by Sargassum Seaweed that caused St. Croix to be at risk for losing power and water.

These incidents demonstrate the fragility of our nation's critical infrastructure. And these kinds of crises will only become more common as extreme weather pushes our systems that deliver critical services like power and water, to fail.

These events challenged our ability to prepare when time was not on our side.

## **Readiness**

And this is an important subject I want to focus on today – the subject of “before.”

We can agree that the best disasters are the ones we prevent from occurring.

But as you saw on the maps I displayed a few moments ago – our nation is facing historic numbers of record weather events leading to a record number of disasters. These threats and hazards are outpacing even the highest levels of resilience and mitigation funding in our nation's history.

But we cannot possibly prevent, mitigate, or plan for everything.

And, if we can't prevent it, the next best thing we can do is posture ourselves, our teams, and our communities to respond effectively when these threats and hazards become emergencies.



I've been closely following the work of the United Nations Office of Disaster Risk Reduction as their global work intersects nicely with our domestic work. Last Thursday was International Resilience Day where the United Nations highlighted their theme for this year which I think we need to focus on more in the United States.

### **Early Warning, Early Action.**

We saw great examples of Early Warning, Early Action as Hurricane Ian formed, strengthened, and approached the Florida coastline. Teams were ready to deploy, equipment and commodities were staged, EOCs were activated, and warnings were issued.

A great example of *Early Warning, Early Action* was shared with me by Chief James Fitzgerald of the City of Orlando Fire Department and deserves repeating here. He said, in the days leading up to Hurricane Ian, firefighters from across the Orange County Fire Department knocked on 8,000 front doors of residents living in manufactured housing units to encourage them to evacuate.

Chief Fitzgerald said that he believed having a firefighter on your doorstep expressing their concern for your safety and encouraging people to evacuate would be far more impactful than any warning one would see on social media or the news.

And he was right. The Chief said the department took 1,700 rescue calls in the hours and days after the storm, but firmly believed that number would have been much, higher without those door-to-door engagements.

When only hours remained before landfall, Orange County firefighters bet on a people-first approach, and because of those efforts, not a single life was lost among those 8,000 homes that firefighters visited.

I want to recognize Chief Fitzgerald and the entire Orange County team for their valiant work to keep their citizens out of harm's way.

But what about those no-notice events that allow us only minutes to respond? When there are thousands of people threatened across multiple jurisdictions during events like tsunamis, or refinery explosions, or incidents of violence?



## Emergency Alerts and Warnings

This is when we don't have our most precious commodity, time. In these situations, the biggest impact we can make is through cohesive, clear, and effective messaging directed to the people in harm's way.

You may recall a 2018 explosion in the gasoline processing unit at the ExxonMobil Refinery in Torrance, California that caused chemical ash to rain down across multiple cities, threatening schools and neighborhoods.

After the event, emergency managers identified gaps in coordination, communication, and interoperability that prevented emergency alerts from going beyond city boundaries.

Unfortunately, this is a common problem many local jurisdictions across the country face.

To be clear, it's a policy problem – not a technological one.

And it's a policy problem that 13 cities in the South Bay region of California came together to solve.

The solution? Alert South Bay.

Alert South Bay brought 13 siloed systems together and integrated them into one alerting authority. Alert South Bay allows jurisdictions to push their own alerts to their citizens like all local alert systems do. But they go a step further, recognizing that threats and hazards do not respect jurisdictional boundaries, each South Bay jurisdiction can alert the other jurisdictions that are in harm's way.

For those of you who have worked at the intersection of emergencies, communication, and politics – partnerships like Alert SouthBay are almost impossible.

But there it is. Success. Proven. Putting People First. And 830,000 and almost the same number of commuters are safer for it. Alert South Bay is just one example of big and bold action happening at the local level solely with local needs in mind. Having now grown to a group of 15 cities, Alert South Bay is an inspiring story of multi-jurisdictional partnership in the name of keeping all communities safe.



And on a national level.... FEMA IPAWS just celebrated its 10-year anniversary.

Over the last 10 years, IPAWS has put the power of public alerting into the hands of emergency managers and public safety officials across the country, with alert originators in:

- All 50 states
- Eight tribes
- Three Territories
- 1,700 counties
- The National Weather Service
- The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children; and
- The U.S. Geological Survey

More than *five million messages* have been sent through IPAWS since its inception, including 75,000 Wireless Emergency Alerts.

Far closer and more important to the parents and grandparents in the room, 125 missing and abducted children have been recovered thanks to AMBER Alerts being sent through WEA.

During heat waves on two coasts, and almost one year apart, our colleagues in California and New York City used WEA to ask their communities to conserve energy during heat waves. In both cases there was an immediate and significant decline in energy use which prevented longer and more dangerous black outs.

Thanks to the advocacy of NEMA and other organizations, IPAWS now has a 24/7 Technical Support Facility that is prepared to support the alerting needs of any alert originator requiring help. IPAWS, WEA, and E-A-S, remain vital tools that allow our communities to receive early warning so they can take early action.

I encourage all of you to continue to use the system and be vocal about areas where we can make it even better!

### **Response: Adaptability as a Critical Component of Emergency Management**

When I spoke to you last year, one of the things I focused on was the evolving role of the emergency manager and the need to embrace risk. This year, I want to build upon that idea by discussing the concept of adaptability as a critical



component of emergency management.

As the role of emergency management and emergency managers continues to expand and evolve, we need to evolve with it and that means making sure each of us, our teams, our organizations, our plans, and our policies are adaptable too. We need to adapt to meet the moment – whatever that moment is.

Now, I am not saying we should abandon the fundamentals of emergency planning but I am saying we need to make sure we look at those plans as the beginning, not the end. We need to feel empowered to change course, improvise, and adapt to the needs of the incidents we face.

Why? Because we keep learning that storms do not care about our timelines. As Ken Graham would tell us. And as we now know that water systems don't know that we don't have a plan for invasive seaweed. And I am sure, in your communities, you have all had your share of "I didn't see that coming" incidents.

Whether we are repositioning critical response assets or designing a new program on the fly, we need to get more comfortable adapting our plans and leaning far forward. We need to make risk-based decisions to get ahead of the threat.

And with the strong support of President Biden, requests for Emergency Declarations have been swiftly approved, allowing states to focus on making forward-leaning, people-first decisions knowing that the federal government has their back.

Virginia is a great example of this approach. Virginia faced a possible, but lesser chance of major impacts from Ian. Still, the state leaned far forward with their preparations. And in partnership with our Region 3 Incident Management Assistance Team, the state aggressively postured response assets in case they needed them.

I know that this work is also taking place in all your states because if anyone understands the need to always be prepared, it is this incredibly dedicated group of leaders in front of me.

Now, I want to switch gears to talk about an upcoming milestone for FEMA that NEMA has been a big part of shepherding.





## Progress: FEMA Strategic Plan

This December marks one year since we launched our “2022-2026 FEMA Strategic Plan”. We have made a lot of progress in implementing our plan, and I especially want to thank NEMA for its work helping us get here.

Our goals to instill equity as a foundation of emergency management, lead the whole of community in climate resilience and promote and sustain a ready FEMA and prepared nation, have kept us anchored in our mission and focused on the future.

### **Equity Goal 1: Benefit-Cost Analysis Change/ Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities/Flood Mitigation Assistance**

When it comes to our first goal of instilling equity, we remain focused on fine-tuning our programs to better serve communities who need our help the most.

One of the things you have heard me say is that we need to get out of our own way. FEMA policies and requirements can sometimes be incredibly dense and bureaucratic – serving as a deterrent for communities seeking our help, not as an incentive.

One of the concerns NEMA has voiced for years – and something I too struggled with as a local emergency manager – is that the discount rate is a major barrier for achieving a favorable Benefit-Cost Analysis. The high discount rate often resulted in great projects ending with a plan on the shelf instead of with a shovel in the ground. So, we decided it was time to fix it.

This month, we announced the discount rate for our Flood Mitigation Assistance and Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities programs would go from 7% to 3%, allowing underserved communities the ability to unlock a level of assistance that – for too long – was out of reach.

This is true progress toward bringing equity to our resilience programs, and I want to thank Victoria Salinas, our Acting Deputy Administrator for Resilience, for her leadership and determination to get this policy adjusted, as it was no small feat.



## **Climate Goal 2: National Exercise Division National Level Exercise 24/Climate Adaptation Series**

And when it comes to leading the whole of community in climate resilience, FEMA National Exercise Division launched the Climate Adaptation Exercise Series so our partners could collaborate with climate adaptation leaders and increase the climate literacy among emergency managers; and empower risk-informed decision making.

Three Regional Climate Adaptation Seminars have been conducted to date and we'll complete every region by early 2023.

To date, these seminars have brought together more than 680 people from more than 250 different organizations, including experts from NOAA, NASA, EPA, USDA, and HUD. Participants discussed current and future regional conditions, impacts, and adaptation and mitigation strategies with their partners in their communities.

The lessons learned from these seminars and the state-specific workshops will inform FEMA National Level Exercise in 2024 (NLE 24).

NLE 24 will test the nation's preparedness to address the risks to national security that climate change poses.

The exercise will focus on the increased frequency and severity of storms in the Pacific Ocean impacting the Hawaiian Islands, combined with opportunistic attacks.

I am really looking forward to seeing the Climate Adaptation Exercise Series make its way to your regions.

## **Goal 3: Civilian Reservist Emergency Workforce (CREW) Act**

And finally, when it comes to promoting and sustaining a ready FEMA and prepared nation, I am proud to say FEMA ability to show up when we are needed most will now be stronger than ever.



Last month, President Biden signed the Civilian Reservist Emergency Workforce (CREW) Act into law. The historic piece of bipartisan legislation is the direct result of over 15 years of significant efforts by FEMA senior leaders and members of Congress who championed our cause.???

By amending the Stafford and USERRA Acts, CREW protects the job rights of FEMA Reservists while they are deployed to disasters, emergencies, and critical trainings.

This milestone is a significant step toward promoting and sustaining a ready FEMA and is a victory for our reservists and sets the stage for us to better recruit reservist cadres going forward. Our reservists are the backbone of the FEMA workforce, and that backbone just got a lot stronger!

I recognize some of you may be concerned that we are going to recruit your limited staff away from their critical roles with these new protections and I can personally say I understand. I came to FEMA with the lens of a local emergency manager from Aurora, Colorado where I was one of the two and a half staff we had. If I lost one of my team members to an agency with 22,000 people, there would be some heartburn for sure.

I'll say two things:

First, we are *not* just recruiting for traditional emergency management roles. The CREW Act will enable us to recruit future reservists from a broader talent pool of people seeking public service opportunities, including some of the most in-demand FEMA mission areas, such as IT, logistics, and supply chain management. This critical expertise will enable us to deliver FEMA programs more quickly and proficiently for communities and survivors alike.

Second, reservists are often launching the recovery mission from its infancy and establishing the FEMA footprint across impacted communities. This kind of work takes a deep understanding of FEMA programs, building and maintaining strong working relationships with our customers, and constantly working through complex problems. These skills serve as a value-add across the emergency management enterprise.



I commit to working in partnership with you, as we design deployment expectations that will not only meet the needs of our survivors, but also maintain and strengthen our enterprise.

## **Call to Action**

In closing, everyone here has always been a partner to FEMA and part of our emergency management family.

As we are navigating more frequent and more intense storms, we know our missions are only getting longer, harder and more complicated.

My ask to you is this: keep pushing us. Keep advocating and keep holding us accountable. We need your expertise, awareness, drive and voice to so we can continue to evolve as an agency and as a profession.

We are only able to meet the challenges of the future as one team, with one mission – and that is helping people on their darkest days, with the shared goal of building a more resilient future.

