

Senate Commerce Committee discusses hurricane preparation and response capabilities

April 12, 2018

On April 12, the Senate Committee on Commerce, Transportation, and Science held a hearing to examine the status of local and federal agencies' recovery from the 2017 Atlantic hurricane season, and ongoing preparation for the 2018 season starting in June. Chairing the hearing, Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS) emphasized the importance of the topic at hand, recalling recovery of his home state after Katrina and subsequent improvements that were made to the region's coastal resilience. Ranking Member Bill Nelson (D-FL) acknowledged that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) did a commendable job in Texas and Florida, but stressed the continuing need for basic electricity and potable water access to be restored in Puerto Rico.

The beginning of the hearing focused on the importance of disaster relief funds for local communities that have been appropriated in the many disaster relief packages passed this Congress. Senator Nelson expressed frustration that funds appropriated in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 have not been released for distribution by the federal agencies and are still awaiting approval from the White House Office of Management and Budget; those funds include over \$2 billion from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for crop losses, as well as \$200 million for fisheries disasters and \$18 million for addressing marine debris from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Charles Lindsey, the city manager for Marathon, Florida, testified that his city and other Florida Keys communities have not received federal reimbursement for Hurricane Irma damages, suggesting that the funds are frozen somewhere between Congress and the communities. Missouri City Mayor Allen Owen also reiterated that his city in Texas has not received funds for damages from Hurricane Harvey and explained that he could have prevented some of the flooding impacts with prior funding to implement mitigation strategies.

Rear Admiral Timothy Gallaudet, Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere, testified about improvements NOAA is making to its hurricane watches and warning systems. For instance, the National Hurricane Center's (NHC) Atlantic track predictions for 2017 set an all-time record for accurately predicting hurricane tracks, improving on the 5-year mean error by about 25 percent. He also shared that, in 2017, NOAA began issuing storm surge watch and warning alerts with easily understandable graphics, and the National Water Model (NWM) also provided vital information used by NOAA River Forecast Centers to issue flood forecasts that were used by emergency managers during Hurricane Harvey. He emphasized that funding provided for the Hurricane Forecast Improvement Program (HFIP) and supplemental and annual appropriations has provided NOAA with much-needed resources for ocean observing, hurricane research, coastal monitoring, upgrading the two NOAA Hurricane Hunter aircrafts, accelerating hurricane-related storm surge prediction capabilities, and providing a critical, historic enhancement in operational high-performance computing. Senator Wicker also emphasized the importance of this funding, saying that sequestration was not only devastating to the Department of Defense, but also to programs like NOAA, funded by non-defense discretionary spending, which benefits the security and safety of Americans. Responding to Senator Nelson's inquiry about plans for procurement of a new gulf stream hurricane hunter through funding appropriated in the fiscal year 2018 omnibus spending bill, Assistant Secretary Gallaudet was hopeful that NOAA would acquire the jet mid-way through the 2018 hurricane season.

The rest of the hearing focused on the National Transportation Safety Board's (NTSB) investigation of the 2015 sinking of the US-flagged *El Faro* cargo ship after sailing straight into the path of Hurricane Joaquin, a Category 4 hurricane. Conclusions from the investigation included that the captain was not properly weather trained and used old weather information to chart the ship's course. Dr. Dinh-Zarr, representing NTSB, recommended that the US Coast Guard require that all deck officers, at both operational and management levels, take a Coast Guard-approved advanced meteorology course to close the gap for mariners initially credentialed before 1998.

Source: U.S. Senate Commerce Committee
