Senate Indian Affairs Committee holds hearing on natural disaster response in Indian country

July 30, 2014

The Senate Indian Affairs committee held a hearing on July 30 to discuss responses to natural disasters on tribal lands. The hearing analyzed the effects of past legislation on tribal responses to disasters, and the work the federal government has done in coordination with tribal governments to mitigate natural disasters.

Elizabeth Zimmerman of the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) Office of Response and Recovery highlighted the Sandy Recovery Improvement Act of 2013 (SRIA). Under SRIA, tribal governments now have the ability to request disaster declarations directly from the President. Previously, the law required tribes to work through state governments to make declarations, which significantly slowed down the process according to Chairman Jon Tester (D-MT).

Ms. Zimmerman underscored FEMA’s appointment of tribal liaison officers who work directly with Indian nations to develop the best ways to respond to natural disasters. Senators Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and Maria Cantwell (D-WA) both suggested FEMA work more toward including tribal input in disaster response plans.

Witnesses also emphasized areas where the federal government could improve. Jake Heflin of the Tribal Emergency Management Association (TEMA) pointed out that the National Response Framework does not provide a primary federal lead for disaster mitigation in Indian country, and stated that support needs to come from FEMA, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and other relevant federal agencies. Matt Gregory, Executive Director of Risk Management for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, stressed the need for increased tribal representation on federal committees dedicated to dealing with natural disasters.

Source: Senate Indian Affairs Committee