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The devastating 2017 hurricane season has prompted Congress to take action in recent months, with a number of committee hearings held in both chambers and new legislation introduced relating to natural disaster preparedness and response.

On October 31, 2017, the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee held a hearing to discuss emergency response to the series of hurricanes in 2017, and ensure that the federal government is meeting the needs of citizens impacted by these disasters. Witnesses at the hearing addressed the unprecedented nature of this past hurricane season, and the subsequent challenges associated with emergency response. Brock Long, Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), focused his testimony on the vital role of the federal government in supporting state, local, tribal, and territorial partners before, during, and after disasters. Regarding future disaster preparedness, Dr. Robert Kadlec, Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR) at the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), stated that the DHHS has a team tracking hurricane response efforts in order to understand and identify actions that have worked well and other areas that need improvement, which he believes will be critical to future operations.

The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee held a similar hearing two days later to explore initial lessons learned from the 2017 hurricanes and identify key challenges and obstacles that may remain in the way of recovery. The discussion at this hearing focused on examining the authorities of federal partners, including FEMA, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the Environmental Protection Agency, to ensure that they have the tools necessary to help communities recovering from disasters, and to help identify solutions that will help reduce future loss of life, lower the rising costs of disasters, and speed recovery.

Also on November 2, the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform held a markup of H.R.4177, the Preparedness and Risk Management for Extreme Weather Patterns Assuring Resilience and Effectiveness (PREPARE) Act of 2017. The bill was introduced by Representative Cartwright (D-PA-17) on October 31, and would help coordinate and facilitate responses to disasters. Specifically, the PREPARE Act would create an interagency oversight council to implement government wide resilience, preparedness, and risk management priorities. It would also facilitate local and state planning to address specific regional issues and establish a regional coordinating system to ensure information sharing. Following consideration by the committee, the bill was reported favorably back to the House.

Sources: Library of Congress, U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
