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Oversight Hearing on "Volcano Hazards: Exploring the National Preparation and Response Strategy"

House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources

November 19, 2014

Witnesses

Dr. Charles Mandeville

Volcano Hazards Program Coordinator, U.S. Geological Survey

Mr. Tom Drea

Director and State Geologist, Wyoming State Geological Survey

Mr. Gordon Ito

Insurance Commissioner, State of Hawaii

Dr. Shanaka de Silva

Professor of Geology and Geophysics, College of Earth, Ocean, and Atmospheric Sciences, Oregon State University

Mr. Darryl Oliviera

Director, Hawaii County Civil Defense

Committee Members Present

Doug Lamborn (R-CO), Chairman

Colleen Hanabusa (D-HI)

Cynthia Lummis (R-WY)

Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI), guest

On November 19, the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources held an oversight hearing on volcanic hazard preparation and response in the U.S., and particularly the role of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) in these functions. The testimony reflected challenges associated with the ongoing eruption of Kilauea in Hawaii that threatens the town of Pahoa.

The witnesses emphasized the importance of the federal government's role in preparing for and responding to volcanic hazards. The USGS Volcanic Hazards Program (VHP) is the main agency responsible for U.S. volcano monitoring and hazard response. However, the program coordinator, Charles Mandeville, testified that only 30 percent of volcanoes hazardous to the U.S. are currently monitored due to lack of funding. VHP's annual budget is \$23 million, and \$1-2 million of that is required to establish monitoring systems for a single volcano, not including ongoing maintenance costs. Dr. Mandeville stated that if VHP's budget does not increase, it could take up to 20 years to complete the monitoring network for all U.S. volcanoes.

Despite these funding shortfalls, witnesses stressed the critical role the USGS plays in dealing with volcanic hazards. Witness Darryl Oliviera, Hawaii's Civil Defense Administrator, discussed the importance of USGS's real-time lava flow monitoring and forecasting in Pahoa, where local agencies do not have the capabilities to perform these functions. Witness Shanaka de Silva of Oregon State University addressed the different roles that academia and government play in studying volcanic hazards. Universities focus on basic research that investigates fundamental volcanic processes, while USGS draws on this knowledge to inform their understanding of the hazards that volcanoes pose to the public and how those can be mitigated.

Mr. Oliviera also testified on the collaborative response to the eruption threatening the town of Pahoa. USGS, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and local governments and utilities, among others, have worked together to make assessments and predictions on the lava flow's activity and to disseminate that information. These efforts have helped to protect critical infrastructure and plan access routes for citizens, as well as maintain the availability of education and healthcare services.

Mr. Oliviera and Gordon Ito, the Hawaii Insurance Commissioner, discussed government's role in acting as the insurer of last resort. During previous lava flows, many homeowners faced non-renewal of their policies by private companies, and many insurers refused to sell new policies for homes in USGS-determined high risk lava flow zones. In order to make homeowners' insurance available in these areas, the Hawaiian government formed HPIA, the Hawaii Property Insurance Association, which often is the only option for local residents.
