Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

Joint Environment and Investigations & Oversight Subcommittee Hearing:
An Examination of Federal Flood Maps in a Changing Climate

Thursday, February 27, 2020

Good afternoon and thanks to all our witnesses for being here. The FEMA flood mapping process is not a topic this Committee has explored very deeply in the past. Our friends in the Financial Services Committee work hard to look after the authorizations and policy changes that program needs, and they stay very busy doing that.

But as with so many federal programs, there is an opportunity here for the Science, Space, and Technology Committee to make sure innovative technologies and cutting-edge strategies for analysis are being put to work for the good of the taxpayer. When we leverage the best available science, we can help make government programs perform better, deliver services quickly, and save money.

In the case of dealing with flooding, this country may need all the help it can get. By all objective measures, the severity and frequency of flooding is on a significant upward trend. The National Flood Insurance Program reached its maximum authority to borrow money in order to cover ratepayer claims in September of 2017 and for the first time, the Treasury cancelled $16 billion of debt. This happened just in time for Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, which delivered unprecedented damages in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico, as well as several neighboring states. FEMA had to borrow another $6.1 billion in order to address the heavy losses from these disasters. I will note that these communities are still healing from the 2017 hurricane season today – even the best insurance can't fix the physical and emotional devastation caused by a flood that takes your home or your business.

It is time to think creatively about how to help get better technologies for flood mapping, evaluation and prediction into the marketplace. FEMA is working on a process called Risk Rating 2.0 that will incorporate new data points, modeling strategies and enhanced granularity in order to provide a more accurate picture of flood risk. It would be beneficial if this process would also allow FEMA and its contracting partners to update its maps in a more timely fashion.

FEMA will need to talk to Congress if it needs support or resources to make Risk Rating 2.0 a success. It's always worth asking the question of what research and development capabilities are available to an agency when it embarks upon an ambitious project like Risk Rating 2.0. I hope

that the Science & Technology Directorate at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is playing a role in the process.

The resources we have at other agencies like the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) also need to be deployed to their greatest potential. NOAA's capabilities for earth observation and predictive modeling along coastlines are unparalleled. NASA Earth Sciences and the U.S. Geological Survey have observational capabilities that we want to make sure are in the mix as well. As climate change continues to move the goalposts for flood risk, we need to make sure that all federal science agencies are coordinating closely in order to deliver information to taxpayers that can help them make sound decisions – and keep themselves and their families safe.

Texas had a bad year for flooding in 2017. I know Oklahoma had a tough year with flooding in 2019. Ranking Member Lucas and I both understand that no region of the country is immune to flood risk -- and that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. I look forward to working with Members on both sides of the aisle and with the Administration on strategies to leverage all our scientific capabilities to address the challenges associated with increased flooding.

I yield back.