



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON  
**SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY**

Opening Statement

**Chairwoman Mikie Sherrill (D-NJ)  
of the Subcommittee on Environment**

Environment Subcommittee Hearing:  
*Coping with Compound Crises: Extreme Weather, Social Injustice, and a Global  
Pandemic*

Wednesday, September 30, 2020

Good morning, and welcome to this Environment Subcommittee hearing on *Coping with Compound Crises: Extreme Weather, Social Injustice, and a Global Pandemic*. I would also like to welcome our esteemed panel of witnesses and thank them for their participation today.

This hearing is very timely as this is National Preparedness Month, which is recognized every September to promote family and community disaster planning. This year's theme is "Disasters Don't Wait. Make Your Plan Today" which is an especially important reminder as our country deals with the COVID-19 pandemic and devastating extreme weather events.

2020 has been a record year in a myriad of ways: a record-breaking number of extreme weather events, a national reckoning with systemic racism, and a global pandemic. From January to July, there were ten weather and climate disasters costing over \$1 billion dollars each – this number does not include any of the devastating wildfires that continue to burn across the West Coast, the Midwest derecho that destroyed homes and cornfields across Iowa and other states, nor the extremely active Atlantic hurricane season that has wiped out entire towns and brought "unsurvivable" storm surge across the Gulf Coast region.

This season of climate and weather disasters compound, or layer onto, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and continued social and environmental injustices. Many communities are grappling with multiple risks at once: the dueling threat of wildfire or hurricane evacuations during shelter-in-place orders; the legacy of historic redlining while trying to rebuild post-disaster; and farmers already reeling from the economic fallout due to the pandemic losing their crop to severe storms. In my home state of New Jersey, where low-income families and small businesses have been particularly devastated, we are all hoping we don't have another Hurricane Sandy during this abnormally active Atlantic hurricane season.

As climate change continues to cause more frequent and severe weather events, we must be ready to face multiple hazards at once. Whether it is several storms in a row, the everyday

impacts of climate change on vulnerable populations, or an extreme weather event during a future pandemic, it is extremely important that we understand how these compound events interact with each other in order to better prepare for, communicate about, and respond to them.

There remains much uncertainty about the most effective risk communication methods during a public health crisis or extreme weather event, especially for vulnerable communities. Understanding how people perceive risk and respond to warnings, especially when faced with multiple threats, is essential to informing emergency planning and response. The Federal government lacks robust funding for emergency management research. We will hear today about how improved coordination and additional interdisciplinary research and risk assessments are needed to bolster our emergency management capabilities.

When a disaster occurs, being able to collect data, particularly on social and behavioral responses, in a timely manner is crucial to understanding immediate impacts to communities. The National Science Foundation's RAPID funding mechanism provides funding for proposals with a severe urgency, including research on natural disasters or similar unanticipated events. This serves as a great model for other agencies to support research related to environmental and public health crises that require a rapid funding mechanism.

As we enter an age where the impacts of disasters will continue to be exacerbated by stressors such as climate change and social injustice, it is imperative that Congress works to improve our country's response to these disasters. Investing in interdisciplinary and rapid funding mechanisms for research into these topics, especially as we expect to see more compounding crises, will be vital to our success in mitigating the impacts of these disasters. I look forward to today's discussion with our witnesses to identify how this Committee can help address some of these critical research gaps. Thank you.