

Opening Statement

Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

Markup of H.R. 1786, the 'National Windstorm Impact Reduction Act Reauthorization of 2013'

June 28, 2013

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This morning we are considering legislation to reauthorize the National Windstorm Impact Reduction Program or N-WIRP. This is an important program that can reduce the vulnerability of our communities to natural disasters.

As we've seen over the last few years the need is great. 2011 was the deadliest and most destructive tornado season in U.S. history. Hurricane Sandy caused over \$65 billion dollars in damages in 2012. And this year, massive tornadoes in Oklahoma and in my state of Texas have resulted in the deaths of more than 30 people.

We should be building stronger and safer communities before a disaster occurs not after. However, all of the witnesses testifying before this Subcommittee stated that N-WIRP is underfunded and that we are missing opportunities to implement low-cost mitigation measures.

That's why I am concerned about the authorization levels in H.R. 1786. They just don't make sense. The bill cuts the program by 14 percent from the levels included in Mr. Neugebauer's 2004 bill which created the program, nearly a decade ago. It also cuts the program below current spending.

I don't understand what my colleagues are trying to accomplish here. They talk about how the program can help protect lives, reduce property losses, and save the taxpayers money, but then they go and cut the program. I don't believe the need for the program has lessened. I actually believe it has grown, and so do the witnesses who have testified before our Committee.

I understand that the budgetary situation has changed, but shouldn't that make it even more important to invest in mitigation activities? According to a study by FEMA, for every dollar we invest in pre-disaster mitigation we save \$4 dollars in disaster recovery.

The concern is not just that my Republican colleagues are cutting the program, but that they are doing so without cutting any of the responsibilities assigned by Congress. This just sets the N-WIRP agencies up to fail.

Mr. Chairman, we haven't had a hearing since 2008 that included any of the federal agencies involved in this program. That was five years ago. We don't know how sequestration has impacted the N-WIRP related activities of these agencies. We don't know what activities the agencies are prioritizing and what areas of the program they are not implementing.

We also do not have a good sense of the amount of money each of the agencies needs to fulfill their role in the program.

I suggest that we take a step back and seek input from the N-WIRP agencies before we move forward with this bill. I believe this Committee has an important role to play in minimizing the number of Americans who are harmed or killed by natural disasters or who have to face the challenge of rebuilding their homes, businesses, and communities. I'm sure that the sponsors of this legislation are well intentioned, we need to make sure we get it right— the stakes are too high to do otherwise.