OPENING STATEMENT

Rep. Scott Peters (D-CA)
Subcommittee on Research & Technology
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

"A Review of the National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program"

July 29, 2014

Thank you Chairman Bucshon for holding this hearing to review the National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program or NEHRP. I want to thank the witnesses on both panels for being here today. I look forward to hearing your testimony.

Though infrequent – earthquakes are unique among natural hazards in that they strike without warning. While areas like my home state of California, in addition to Oregon, Washington, and Alaska are the most well-known areas for earthquakes. However, earthquakes are not a hazard that is confined to the west coast. A 2011 earthquake in DC caused over $200 million in damages, including damage to the Washington Monument and Smithsonian. It is estimated that 75 million Americans in 39 states are exposed to significant seismic risk and nearly all states in the U.S. have some level of risk.

In an effort to mitigate the harmful impacts and better prepare for future earthquakes, Congress authorized the National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program, an interagency program that includes National Institute of Standards and Technology, National Science Foundation, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and United States Geological Survey.

Since NEHRP was founded in 1977, we have learned a lot about how to prepare for, mitigate, and respond to a large-scale earthquake. Research programs, including ones at University of California San Diego and San Diego State University, are underway to help us better understand earthquakes, develop safer building construction standards, and ensure that affected communities can respond to, and recover from, earthquakes as quickly as possible. But more work is needed.

I am pleased that we have representatives from all four NEHRP agencies here today to testify about their activities to reduce the risks of life and property from earthquakes in the United States. I am also pleased that we will hear from outside stakeholders, both private sector and academic, about how the program is working and what, if any, changes are needed to improve its effectiveness.

As my colleagues may know, the reauthorization of these risk reduction programs is long overdue. The authorization for this important program expired in 2009. Interagency programs, like National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program, improve our understanding of earthquakes and then turn that knowledge into mitigation and outreach activities that will save lives and reduce economic damages.

While we can't prevent natural disasters, we can do more to lessen the costs to human life and property. Over the last two years the Federal government has spent more than $136 billion – much of it off-budget – on relief for hurricanes, tornadoes, droughts, wildfires, and other extreme weather events. It's time that the government stops working in a reactive way to natural disasters and instead gets to work efficiently helping states and localities find the best steps to prepare, plan for, and more quickly recover from these events.

We know that for every dollar spent now on resiliency, we can avoid at least $4 in future losses. It makes more sense to approach this by thinking how we can make our communities better prepared. If we are focused on reducing spending, let's do it in a way that saves us more money in the long run.

Mr. Chairman, my goal is the same yours – to decrease the vulnerability of communities across the country, including mine in San Diego. I look forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle on a bipartisan bill that would reauthorize National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program and welcome any comments from the witnesses today about changes and updates that should be made to the NEHRP authorization language.

I want to thank the Chairman for holding this important hearing. I look forward to hearing the testimony and I thank you all for being here today. I yield back the balance of my time.