

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

Washington, D.C. 20515

July 16, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pence  
Vice President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. Vice President:

As you continue to focus on the nation's response to the evolving coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, we urge you to direct federal agencies to form contingency plans for storms, floods, fires, extreme heat, and other weather and climate events this year. Our health care system, economy, and citizens are already overburdened by the pandemic and its repercussions. On June 23, 2020 Trump Administration officials testified before the Energy & Commerce Committee that flu season will also place a "tremendous burden" on the ongoing COVID-19 response.<sup>1</sup> Without proper planning and coordination by the White House, including full use of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act and the Defense Production Act (DPA), natural disasters could undo tenable progress to respond to COVID-19 and deepen this humanitarian and economic crisis.

The global public health pandemic has already reached over 3,416,000 cases and 135,000 deaths in the United States.<sup>2</sup> While it is hard to imagine further compounding this crisis, we must not lose sight of the fact that rising global temperatures are causing an increase in natural disasters and costly damage. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)'s National Centers for Environmental Information, 14 extreme weather and climate disasters costing \$1 billion or more struck U.S. communities in 2019.<sup>3</sup> Between 2010 and 2019, there were 119 of these catastrophic events, causing over \$800 billion in losses to our economy.<sup>4</sup>

Whether it was Midwest tornadoes and storms, or wildfires in the West, reports of natural disasters straining the pandemic response and communities have already begun to appear. The Southeast was threatened by two named tropical storms before hurricane season even formally began on June 1, a third named storm immediately afterward, and Tropical Storm Fay deluged the Mid-Atlantic this past weekend. NOAA is predicting an above-normal Atlantic hurricane

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<sup>1</sup> House Committee on Energy and Commerce, *Hearing on Oversight of the Trump Administration's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 116th Cong. (June 23, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Coronavirus Disease 2019 Cases in the US* (July 15, 2020) ([www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html)).

<sup>3</sup> National Centers for Environmental Information, *Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters: Time Series* (2020) ([www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/time-series](http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/time-series)).

<sup>4</sup> Adam B. Smith, *2010-2019: A landmark decade of U.S. billion-dollar weather and climate disasters*, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Jan. 8, 2020).

season this year, which does not bode well for the Atlantic or Gulf Coast states that have been hit hard by the pandemic.

We request the White House order all appropriate Federal agencies to create contingency and surge plans for how to support communities in the case of a compound threat scenario. Many of the same frontline workers, resources, and infrastructure that are critical to fighting the pandemic are also necessary to natural disaster mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. Essential public and private sector personnel already stretched thin by the pandemic play vital roles in keeping communities safe and lifelines operational during natural disasters.

Personal protective equipment (PPE) and other supplies are necessary to keep first responders, recovery workers, and the public safe from polluted air and water that can persist due to wildfire smoke, flooding of toxic sites, or hurricane damage to industrial plants. Resilient energy infrastructure for hospitals, field hospitals, non-congregate shelters, food banks, and other community lifeline resources must be deployed to prepare for power outages. Reliable broadband internet is also critical, and we must ensure that emergency communications are uninterrupted during a disaster.

Likewise, the sound policies that are critical to safeguarding public health at this time, such as social distancing guidance and stay-at-home orders, could run in direct conflict with guidance to seek congregant shelter or evacuation orders that are common sense protocol during an extreme weather scenario. Due to COVID-19, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has already announced plans to ease access to non-congregate sheltering, such as temporary housing at hotels or dorms, for States, Tribes, and territories in need of Federal assistance during hurricane season. It is also coordinating the distribution of PPE and other supplies in the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) for emergency response in coordination with the Department of Health and Human Services.

However, FEMA acknowledges that such safety protocols to avoid mass gatherings may not always be possible due to a lack of local infrastructure or the nature of the emergency. This recently occurred in Michigan, where heavy rains caused the breaching of two dams. Nearby rural households were forced to evacuate to congregant shelters, putting them at risk of COVID-19 transmission. FEMA has also acknowledged that PPE and other supplies may not always be available.

We are glad that FEMA plans to prioritize the use of non-congregate sheltering and is coordinating access to PPE and other supplies considering the extraordinary compound risks presented by the pandemic and future disasters. Nonetheless, the increasing occurrence and severity of natural catastrophes of all types and the high risk of COVID-19 transmission calls for a robust whole-of-government response to protect U.S. communities and frontline workers.

Federal data has clearly shown that communities of color and underserved communities are disproportionately impacted by the ongoing pandemic and must be accommodated in all natural disaster scenarios, including extreme heat. Environmental justice communities live everyday with the cumulative impacts of pollution or other environmental risk factors that cause health disparities and disproportionate vulnerability to COVID-19. Extreme heat can negatively impact the body's cardiovascular system, and households and the homeless that cannot afford or

The Honorable Michael R. Pence

July 16, 2020

Page 3

do not have access to air conditioning will suffer more greatly under stay-at-home orders and social distancing guidance.

During extreme heat emergencies, municipal governments typically open congregate cooling facilities at community centers and libraries, but such a move carries certain risk this summer. We urge the White House to utilize the flexibility of the Stafford Act to ensure that State, local, Tribal, and territorial governments can provide non-congregant cooling assistance for impacted populations – whether that is non-congregant, air-conditioned sheltering or temporary air-conditioned retrofits allowing the public to remain in their homes – utilizing the existing Emergency or Major Disaster declarations granted by the President to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Vulnerable individuals and households without access to a cool and safe environment, particularly in pollution-burdened communities, must be able to seek shelter from a heat wave and the pandemic from the safety of an air-conditioned location or receive assistance in creating a safe home environment for the duration of the pandemic.

Numerous natural disasters are likely to cause a surge in the need for PPE and other supplies for response and recovery personnel while we also continue to need these resources for ongoing COVID-19 response. Using DPA authorities, we urge the Administration to assess the state of the SNS and better prepare for this surge in demand among non-Tier I essential personnel as defined by the Department of Homeland Security Critical Infrastructure Security Agency's guidance on Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce. The Federal government must also be ready to distribute PPE and other supplies broadly if needed to the public in the event of a disaster.

As the pandemic continues, it is critical that the Administration be prepared for responding to a natural disaster at the same time. The White House and Federal agencies must prepare for these and myriad other compound threat scenarios, especially as we enter peak seasons for hurricanes and wildfires. We urge the White House to use the full power of the law to fortify our nation's resilience as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves.

Thank you for your immediate attention to this matter. We look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,



Frank Pallone, Jr.  
Chairman  
Committee on Energy and Commerce



Peter A. DeFazio  
Chair  
Committee on Transportation  
and Infrastructure



Eddie Bernice Johnson  
Chairwoman  
Committee on Science, Space,  
and Technology