

**Written Statement of  
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**“The State of Northern Border Preparedness:  
A Review of Federal, State, and Local Coordination”**



**FEMA**

**Before the  
U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security's  
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response,  
and Communications**

**Detroit, Michigan  
October 28, 2011**

## **I. Introduction**

Chairman Bilirakis, Representative Clarke, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: my name is Andrew Velasquez and I am the Regional Administrator for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Region V Office located in Chicago, Illinois. It is an honor to appear before you today on behalf of FEMA to discuss the critical federal, state, local coordination taking place along the United States northern border. FEMA recognizes that we are not the nation's whole emergency management team; rather we are part of the team. This team includes not only federal, state, local, and tribal governments, but also private, non-profit, and citizen partners—the Whole Community. This Whole Community approach emphasizes the importance of working with all partners in order to effectively prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards. In some cases, the Whole Community also includes our international partners.

“In my testimony today, I will describe and review the federal, state, and local roles in responding to emergencies, as well as the current state of cross-border emergency assistance agreements at each level of government, with a particular focus on how FEMA is working to improve preparedness along the northern border, specifically here in the central region.”

## **II. A Review of the Emergency Response System and Process and the Role of Foreign Assistance**

Regardless of how prepared communities may be for an emergency, disasters can strike anywhere and at any time. Within the United States, the response to and recovery from major emergencies and disasters are managed and coordinated under the National Response Framework (NRF) and most recently the National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF). A major tenet of that framework is that all emergencies and disasters are local. Local governments are the first to respond to a wide variety of events. When those governments become overwhelmed they can seek additional assistance from the state. In some circumstances, when the state becomes overwhelmed and needs assistance, the federal government can be called upon to provide assistance where needed. While this is the standard process for domestic incident response, jurisdictions located along the borders with Canada and Mexico may also find it necessary to enter into emergency assistance agreements, allowing the cross-border sharing of additional critical resources (personnel and equipment) that can quickly help protect property and save lives.

### **Local Governments**

Local emergency response personnel, including first responders, public health and medical providers, emergency management officials, public works and other groups within the community, are typically the first to detect a threat or hazard, and respond to it. They are often the first to arrive, the last to leave, and play a major role in leading the jurisdiction's recovery efforts.

Local senior officials and their emergency managers create and maintain a foundation for an effective response. They organize and integrate their capabilities and resources with neighboring

or county jurisdictions, the state, and non-governmental partners, including the private sector. All these entities form collaborative partnerships and resource capabilities which local governments can use during emergencies.

While intra-state and inter-state mutual aid agreements are commonplace between local governments and their neighbors throughout the United States, many northern border cities and counties have mutual aid agreements with their international cross-border counterparts. Mutual aid exists today along the border at the local level between cities such as Port Huron, Michigan and Sarnia, Ontario in Canada and many others. Many of these have a long history dating back to the 1960s. These agreements normally provide mutual aid for fire and emergency medical services (EMS). The agreements are only between specific cities where the closest support lies across the border; e.g. Port Huron & Sarnia. Items normally covered in the agreement include how requests for assistance are coordinated, command and control operations, liability, reimbursement expectations, duration of the agreement and joint training.

### **States and Territories**

States and territories have the primary responsibility to protect the public health and welfare of the people living within their jurisdiction. Should local and county governments become overwhelmed, state resources are the closest line of support to those impacted by incidents.

The role of the state government is to supplement local efforts before, during, and after an event, providing and coordinating resources and capabilities from throughout the state. They have significant resources of their own, including state emergency management and homeland security agencies, mutual aid programs, the National Guard, and a host of other state agencies that can bring specialized support. If a state anticipates that the response to an event may exceed its resources and capabilities, the Governor can request additional assistance from other states through mutual aid and assistance agreements such as the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) or from the federal government – often in the form of a Stafford Act declaration. EMAC, established in 1996, is a system that allows U.S. states to transfer resources, such as personnel, equipment, and commodities during governor-declared states of emergencies.

However, in some circumstances it may be necessary for states along the northern border and outside of the federal response process to seek assistance directly from their Canadian provincial counterparts. Although states, provinces and territories are capable of managing most emergencies, there are times when disasters exceed the state, provincial or territorial resources and require outside assistance. Even when EMAC or federal assistance is warranted, cross border mutual aid assistance may be more readily available, timelier, less expensive, and/or operationally expedient. FEMA is supportive of these types of cross-border mutual aid agreements and actively assists states, through regional emergency management committees and the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA) to develop and win approval for these pre-negotiated assistance agreements.

FEMA's role in coordinating state/province agreements is based on section 612 of the Stafford Act, mutual aid pacts between states and neighboring countries, which states that "the Director (now Administrator of FEMA) shall give all practicable assistance to States in arranging, through

the Department of State, mutual emergency preparedness aid between the State and neighboring countries.”

In the mid-1990’s, Regional Emergency Management Advisory Committees were established as four geographically organized entities: Eastern Regional (EREMAC), Prairie Regional (PREMAC), Central Regional (CREMAC) and Western Regional Emergency Management Advisory Committees (WREMAC).

The purpose of these four groups is to advance the development of regional cross-border emergency preparedness and response arrangements. The CREMAC comprises FEMA Regions II, III and V, including the States of Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin and the Canadian Provinces of Ontario and Quebec. The co-chairs of CREMAC rotate between state and provincial emergency managers. Public Safety Canada and FEMA are non-voting members.

FEMA Regions II and V have been working with CREMAC members to build consensus on a cross border mutual aid agreement. Recently, NEMA and the Canadian Council of Emergency Management Organizations have been working together to reach agreement on draft language for a Central Region Emergency Management Assistance Agreement (CREMAA) and a Prairie Region Emergency Management Advisory Agreement (PREMAA). The draft CREMAA/PREMAA is a U.S. state to Canadian province agreement which will better align state and provincial emergency management mandates. CREMAA/PREMAA also encourages and allows cooperative planning and exercises so jurisdictions located on both sides of the border are better prepared for a disaster regardless of the initiating event and the appropriate response and recovery activities. Through the CREMAA/PREMAA, any resource, whether personnel or equipment, could be made available from one member state to another. The draft agreement has been sent to the states and provinces of both the CREMAA and PREMAA organizations.

On October 26, 2011, FEMA Region V hosted a Central and Prairie region emergency management meeting to gain consensus of the latest iteration of the CREMAA/PREMAA agreement. Representatives from CREMAC, PREMAC, NEMA, FEMA and the Canadian Council of Emergency Management Organizations discussed the content of the agreements, potential issues and challenges, as well as the ultimate approval process.

While a cross-border state to province agreement is being developed for use along the central region of the northern border, the Eastern Regional Emergency Management Advisory Committee, similar to the CREMAC and also known as the International Emergency Management Group (IEMG), has developed its own agreement known as the International Emergency Management Assistance Compact (IEMAC). The effort to build this compact began almost fifteen years ago when the Premiers and Governors strengthened a 1975 agreement between the State of Maine and the Province of New Brunswick. The IEMAC is now a formal, congressionally ratified agreement with bylaws and an operations manual that includes five eastern Canadian Provinces and six U.S. States.

Similarly, the Western Regional Emergency Management Advisory Committee (WREMAC) has a congressionally ratified agreement, the Pacific Northwest Emergency Management

Arrangement (PNEMA) signed in 1998. Under the agreement, WREMAC coordinates cross-border mutual disaster preparedness, response, and recovery among two Canadian Provinces and three U.S. States.

### **III. The Federal Role in Domestic U.S. Disasters, Foreign Assistance, and the International Assistance System**

The federal government maintains significant capabilities and resources that can support a stricken state. For events where the federal government has primary jurisdiction or authorities (e.g., on a military base or a federal facility or lands), federal departments or agencies may be the first responders and the first line of defense, coordinating activities with state, territorial, tribal, and local partners. The federal government also maintains its own working relationships with the private sector and other non-governmental partners.

In accordance with the Homeland Security Act of 2002 and Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD) 5, the Secretary of Homeland Security is the Principal Federal Official for domestic incident management. While DHS maintains the responsibility for the overall incident management, a number of federal departments and agencies have their own authorities for leading federal response to certain emergency and disaster events. As the leader of the federal incident management team, DHS coordinates with the entire federal family to surge federal support at all levels of the response.

In some circumstances, such as a catastrophic event, the federal government, through the U.S. Department of State, may seek the assistance of foreign governments such as Canada or Mexico. In order to enable that coordination of assistance at the federal level, the United States government created the International Assistance System (IAS). This system establishes standard operating procedures for requesting specific international assistance when specific resources are unavailable in the United States, reviewing foreign government offers for acceptance or declination, and managing the logistics of transporting, receiving, and distributing international donations.

FEMA, the Department of State, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) coordinate the IAS to address both the critical needs of a response operation as well as the foreign policy objectives of the United States. As such, the IAS applies only to formal transactions between the United States and foreign governments or international organizations, during a large-scale domestic disaster, following a Stafford Act declaration.

In addition to mutual aid agreements, the United States Government and Government of Canada have a long history of cooperation in the area of emergency management. There are a number of federal level bi-national agreements to facilitate information exchange, advances in technology, preparedness and mutual assistance during cross border incidents.

For example, under the *U.S.-Canada Agreement on Emergency Management Cooperation*, FEMA co-leads two bi-national working groups to address challenges to federal-to-federal mutual aid assistance, and identify opportunities to jointly train and exercise. To further enhance this bi-national partnership, President Obama and Prime Minister Harper signed a joint

declaration this year called *Beyond the Border: A Shared Vision for Perimeter Security and Economic Competitiveness*. Under this declaration, FEMA and the interagency are partnering with Canada to prepare for and respond to bi-national Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear and Explosive (CBRNE) events; address barriers to bi-lateral communications interoperability; and enhance collective preparedness for health security threats.

Additionally, the *Canada/U.S. Reciprocal Forest Fire Fighting Arrangement* provides for the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior to enter into arrangements with foreign fire organizations for assistance in wildfire protection. The *Canada – U.S. Joint Inland Pollution Contingency Plan* provides for a cooperative mechanism for preparedness for and response to polluting incidents that cause, or may cause, damage to the environment along the inland boundary.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the concept of mutual aid has been the foundation of emergency response for decades. When a disaster occurs, the ability to save lives and protect property is greatly increased by an effective and timely response by trained emergency responders. It is critical that these professional life savers – whether they come from United States, Canada, or Mexico – have the ability to share knowledge, equipment, expertise, and are ready to function as a team during times of crisis.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am happy to answer any questions the Subcommittee may have.