



WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

**The Honorable Linda Langston
President, National Association of Counties and
Supervisor, Linn County, Iowa**

**On behalf of the
National Association of Counties (NACo)**

**Before the
U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management
“Disaster Mitigation: Reducing Costs and Saving Lives”**

**Washington, D.C.
April 3, 2014**

Thank you, Chairman Barletta, Ranking Member Carson and members of the subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today on disaster mitigation efforts at the county level.

My name is Linda Langston and I am a county supervisor in Linn County, Iowa. I also serve as the president of the National Association of Counties (NACo). NACo represents all 3,069 county governments in the United States.

Counties play an instrumental role in our nation’s intergovernmental system of federal, state and local governments. Counties are a major owner of facilities and infrastructure, including 45 percent of America’s roads, nearly 40 percent of bridges, 960 hospitals and more than 650 nursing homes. Counties play a critical role in justice and public safety policy and services, with 3,105 county police and sheriff departments as well as 911 call centers, emergency

management professionals, fire departments, public health officials, public records and code inspectors, among others.

At the leadership level, county elected officials are tasked with shaping county and community policies and investments that enable economic and community development, safeguard our citizens and community investments, and promote public health and wellbeing. Nationwide, counties invest nearly \$500 billion each year to pursue these goals. We also use our convening powers, professional networks and policymaking authorities that all are essential to effective disaster mitigation practices.

As president of NACo, I have implemented a presidential initiative focused on resiliency. My “Resilient Counties” initiative was started to help counties bolster their ability to thrive amid ever-shifting physical, social and economic conditions which includes preparation for and recovery from natural or man-made disasters. Counties are responsible for carrying out both long-term planning to promote resiliency, and taking immediate action in a crisis situation. Through this initiative, we are working to strengthen county resiliency by building leadership capacity to identify and manage risk and enable counties to become more flexible, responsive and prepared.

I want to thank you, Chairman Barletta, Ranking Member Carson and members of this subcommittee for recognizing the value of disaster mitigation and again, allowing me to testify.

Mr. Chairman, I will focus my remarks today on three key flood mitigation efforts taking place in counties across America.

- **Proactive county planning is the cornerstone of flood mitigation efforts.** County governments are often land use regulators and with this authority, counties can encourage development that is safe and performed in a manner that will ensure the community’s viability. Through comprehensive, fact-based, inclusive planning processes, counties can encourage development in safer, low-risk areas.
- **Participation in the Community Rating System (CRS).** The National Flood Insurance Program’s (NFIP) Community Rating System is an important tool for local governments, nationally. This program has proven to be a great way to achieve multiple goals. Through CRS, communities are able to educate residents on flood risk and mitigate flood impacts while lowering insurance premium costs for their residents and businesses.
- **Building relationships and establishing responsibilities before a disaster.** The key to preparing and managing a disaster begins by building relationships beforehand so when a disaster happens, resources can be deployed quickly and efficiently through an established network with pre-assigned roles and responsibilities. Counties can play a key role in facilitating these critical relationships.

Proactive county planning is the cornerstone of flood mitigation efforts.

Counties are tasked with the important responsibility to protect the health, safety and welfare of their citizens, as well as maintain and improve their quality of life. This includes effective county planning. County land use planning is an ongoing process, whether the community is already built up, growing rapidly or rural in nature. Local governments use land use planning to effectively manage the development of land within their borders – this could encompass protection of land and water resources in order to accomplish local goals. This also includes addressing flood plain management and hazard mitigation, while ensuring the economic viability of regions.

Every year, counties invest \$25.6 billion in economic development and \$106.3 billion in building infrastructure and maintaining and operating public works. In an era where “doing more with less” has become the norm, counties must make certain that the investments made in building communities carry through long-term. As stewards of public finances and property, counties must also ensure efficient use of public funds. Natural disasters like flooding pose a major risk to the social, environmental and economic health of counties nationwide. Such risks make the pursuit of flood mitigation a necessity. Additionally, as land use regulators, counties are responsible to pursue flood mitigation holistically.

Generally, counties have engaged in three types of land use activities to mitigate flood impacts: building flood protections in the form of physical structures and supporting natural systems, removing flood-prone structures and encouraging safe new development through land use regulations.

Structural protections, including activities like building levees or dams, and restoring natural systems, such as wetlands, continue in many parts of the country as a way to mitigate flood impact. Flood protection structures play an important role in protecting a community against surging waters. Fairfax County, Virginia is undertaking a levee and pumping station project to protect homes and other property in the Huntington neighborhood from flooding; completion is scheduled for spring 2019. Wetland restoration projects are also occurring in places like Lee County, Florida and Jefferson Parish, Louisiana as a way to promote storm and flood resiliency. Lee County (Florida), jointly with the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation and the City of Sanibel pursued the Clam Bayou restoration project to promote storm and flood resiliency in the Clam Bayou, a 400-acre mangrove-lined area on Sanibel Island in southwest Florida. Jefferson Parish, Louisiana joined with public and private partners to re-establish the native cypress trees along the Bayou Segnette Waterway south of New Orleans. With support from over 150 local and national volunteers, the strategic planting of more than 3,400 bald cypress

trees along 32,000 feet of riparian buffer provided Jefferson Parish with a much-needed stronger and more resilient barrier to floods and storms.

In addition to building protective structures or restoring natural systems, counties are also utilizing property buyouts in order to protect against potential property and life loss. The Midwest floods of 1993, inundated nine states with flood water and left \$12 billion of damage. Since the 1993 floods, the state of Iowa and local governments, in partnership with FEMA, have removed more than 1,000 properties in the floodplain. Black Hawk County (Iowa), home to roughly 131,800 county residents, was one of the counties that participated in FEMA's buyout mitigation efforts. In December 1993, Black Hawk County started purchasing structures in floodplains in Cedar Falls, Iowa and re-purposed the land as open space – available to residents for gardening, hunting and fishing. The project was completed by September of 1997, shortly before Cedar Falls would experience another flood in 1999. As a result of the buyouts, ninety-eight homes and one lot were purchased, ninety-six of the homes were demolished and two moved to higher ground. In all, eighty-nine families moved safely away from the floodplain. The total cost of the program was \$4.3 million and there was little loss to local business or the tax base. Since the beginning of the project in 1993, the same area has experienced several flood events and the estimated avoided damages from these floods total \$5.34 million. The State of Iowa projects the 30-year benefits from this project to be over \$6.6 million in avoided damages. The mitigation buyouts undertaken by local government in Black Hawk County were successful, saving taxpayers money, protecting property and lives.

Counties recognize the value of disaster mitigation measures and are encouraging safe new development through land use regulation. Ideally, all counties would have sufficient funds to buy out properties in flood prone areas. However, not all counties have the financial ability to do so, especially those that are more rural and have a smaller tax base. Smaller, more rural counties, however, are utilizing their land use authority to encourage safe development. In Iowa County, Wisconsin, home to roughly 23,000 residents, the County reviews all permit applications to determine whether proposed building sites will be reasonably safe from flooding. McPherson County, Kansas, home to roughly 29,000 residents, designated a floodwater structure breach district in which no new structures may be built because of the associated flood risk. McKenzie County, North Dakota is home to roughly 6,300 residents, and to protect against potential flooding, the county does not allow construction in the Special Flood Hazard Area (SFHA) and requires additional construction standards related to anchoring, construction materials and elevation to be met if an approved development is to take place.

Coconino County, Arizona is not in a flood zone but in 2010 experienced the Schultz wildfire, the largest wildfire in Arizona that year, which cost \$120 million to fight. Prior to the fire, the landscape was easily able to handle rain events but the Schultz wildfire changed the physical

condition of the environment, creating optimum conditions for future flash flooding. Heavy rains followed the fire which resulted in significant flooding of residential areas below.

Since the fire, Coconino County has instituted storm water drainage requirements for all new subdivisions. This new standard will require that the drainage systems be able to handle a five-year, 24-hour storm event (five-year storm means a 20 percent chance of occurrence per year).

To address the challenges created by the fire, Coconino County has invested over \$18 million of county funds to mitigate flood impact. From its federal partners, the county drew upon funds from the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) and additional funds through federal highway funding and the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Emergency Watershed Protection Program. The funds were used for large mitigation projects including land treatment (planting vegetative cover) and building protective structures like berms, among other activities.

The Hazard Mitigation Grant Program's (HMGP) post-disaster mitigation funds are essential to local communities. From providing the tools and resources needed for Black Hawk County to buy out repetitive loss properties and enabling Coconino County to create water drainage conveyances, HMGP helps counties build safer communities after a disaster. And we are pleased that the Sandy Recovery Improvement Act of 2013 (SRIA) recognizes the significance of this program by streamlining procedures and by allowing the advancement of funds so that post-disaster mitigation activities can be implemented as quickly as possible.

Another important program in which counties participate is the Community Rating System (CRS), part of the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). By providing discounts based on accumulated points for floodplain management activities that exceed NFIP minimum standards, communities are incentivized to recognize and plan for flood risk. In my own county, we participate in CRS not only because we want our residents to receive a discount on their flood insurance premiums but also because we want to educate our residents about true flood risk—to help protect our citizens and communities from future disasters. This program captures the most effective ways of informing and preparing community residents for flood hazards.

CRS allows a diverse range of communities to adopt safe and resilient policies and practices that have a direct impact on the risk exposure of the community. For example, Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana, home to roughly 111,890 residents, is distributing flood risk information through a dedicated website, www.floodsafeterrebonne.com. Additionally, the parish has held public meetings and is currently working on additional amendments to their flood ordinance to enable the parish to receive a higher CRS rating. These and other CRS activities have resulted in a 25 percent discount for county residents; it is one of the highest CRS ratings in the state.

King County, Washington, home to over 2 million county residents, is one of only two counties in the country with a CRS rating of 2, resulting in a 40 percent discount to those in the Special Flood Hazard Area (SFHA). It was the first county in the nation to achieve this rating. Beginning in 1990, King County has steadily increased its CRS rating by dedicating county resources to CRS activities like developing floodplain mapping studies which accounts for approximately 12 percent of King County's overall CRS credit.

CRS works because it helps communities identify and understand their risk and offers a diverse suite of options to mitigate against that risk. Terrebonne Parish and King County's accomplishments are possible because these counties understand their risk exposure.

Building relationships and establishing responsibilities before a disaster.

Disasters are local. Local governments are often first to the scene with police, sheriff and firefighters. They are also there for the cleanup, recovery and rebuilding. It is our job as local officials to protect both our public safety officers and our residents, while maximizing cost-efficiency by reducing risk before a disaster happens. A large part of the county mission to reduce risk can be accomplished through strong relationships among county officials and county residents, among county government personnel and our state and federal partners. Planning, coordination and collaboration among all levels of government – local, state and federal – before a disaster is key.

Coordination between county government and residents. When it comes to disaster mitigation, a large part of my role as an elected official is explaining risk and establishing buy-in from county residents. During a disaster, communication to county residents plays an important role in confining potential disaster costs. As such, counties are adopting technological and social media tools to encourage individuals to recognize and prepare for risk. To prepare *for* disaster, Coconino County, Arizona publishes a flood guide that reads like a newspaper and guides residents on disaster planning – many county residents do not know to have a ready-packed bag and critical papers protected and handy if a flash flood were to occur. In the event *of a* disaster, Coconino County is prepared to use software to alert residents in the area and utilizes social media to further reach their residents. In order to reduce cost and save lives, local officials need to stay connected to their constituents through every available channel.

Public information outreach is valuable because we help better inform our residents about risk; it also is an opportunity for local officials to engage with their residents. In times of emergency, these relationships have proved invaluable. In the Waldo Canyon Fire that ravaged El Paso County, Colorado in 2012, over 41,000 hours of volunteer work was completed by 6,000 people

– I believe that this type of recovery is only possible because of the strong, *deliberate*, social fabric that ties counties and their residents.

At the national level, we have learned from FEMA’s Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) and many counties have implemented IPAWS at home. IPAWS provides our county public safety officials with an effective way to alert and warn the public about emergencies using the Emergency Alert System (EAS), Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Weather Radio and other public alerting systems from a single web-based interface. Baldwin County, Alabama and Monroe County, Indiana are just two examples of counties that have integrated IPAWS into their emergency alert systems – our counties are making sure that we do everything we can to alert our residents should a disaster strike.

Internal county government communications. Implementing outward bound communications systems is one part of planning for disaster. Internally, counties are proactively assigning roles and responsibilities among county personnel so recovery can happen efficiently should a disaster happen. That is why in my home county, the county board of supervisors regularly meets as the hazard mitigation committee. This is not simply an exercise for us – but helps us to develop the plan that will guide the county’s efforts should another flood or disaster consume our community. As a result of these hazard-focused meetings, the Linn County Board of Supervisors is better informed about all the potential risks that face our county. We also know who to call upon should we face a disaster – for example, when a disaster strikes, we know to get in touch with the three utility companies that service our area and the twenty-five public safety services who manage everything from fire, emergency medical and ambulance services throughout the county. Establishing disaster-focused roles and responsibilities helps us know who to call upon should a flash flood happen while kids are being bussed to school or if there are a large number of pets roaming during a flash flood, a problem I faced when my county was inundated by flood waters in 2008.

Coordination across levels of government. From a macro point of view, we all know that partnerships between local, state and federal entities help expand resources and improve coordination. When a disaster strikes, the strength of the federal-state-local partnership is tested and it is incumbent upon us as elected officials to strengthen and encourage strong intergovernmental relationships.

In late January, I participated in a workshop hosted by FEMA’s Risk Analysis Division on how to engage local elected officials and the community. NACo Second Vice President and El Paso County Commissioner (Colorado) Sallie Clark, also attended. She shared her experience with disaster mitigation and lessons learned from the Waldo Canyon Fire in 2012 and the Black Forest Fire in 2013. As a result of these wildfires, four people lost their lives, over 32,000 acres

and 800 homes were destroyed. The fires caused so much environmental change in the county that El Paso County has now become susceptible to flash flooding, further threatening the built environment and its residents. As we spoke to FEMA personnel from all the FEMA regions, we emphasized the importance of identifying local government partners and responsibilities before a disaster. We also identified ways FEMA and county officials could work together to better educate the community and protect ourselves from risk. It often begins with a conversation and knowing exactly who to call, not if but when, something devastating happens in your community.

Collaboration has taken a regional form in Iowa. Instead of developing flood management and water quality standards by political jurisdiction, we have adopted a model that allows collaboration among local governments and other stakeholders. By creating ten Watershed Management Authorities for each of the ten watersheds in Iowa, we are better able to collaborate and plan for disasters on a more regional basis. We have engaged in these multijurisdictional projects because disasters know no political or geographic boundaries – as such, work must often occur in a collaborative manner.

Our federal partners have also been instrumental in educating county governments about risk. Through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Critical Infrastructure Vulnerability Assessments, counties are better able to identify vulnerabilities and interdependencies that affect nationally significant critical infrastructure and key resources. DHS uses site assistance visits of nationally-critical infrastructure sites to produce site-specific reports that alert counties and other site owners of existing vulnerabilities.

In closing, communication between counties and their residents, among officials and among our state and federal partners, should be initiated long before a disaster. This is one of the most cost effective and efficient ways to ensuring that our counties bounce back should we face a disaster.

Thank you Chairman Barletta, Ranking Member Carson and members of the subcommittee for recognizing the value of disaster mitigation and for implementing those values in the Sandy Recovery Improvement Act of 2013. Thank you also for the opportunity to testify today. I would welcome any questions.