Re: Disaster Supplemental Appropriations 2013

Dear Chairman Rogers and Ranking Member Lowey,

As the House of Representatives considers the Disaster Supplemental Appropriations measures in mid-January, the Association of State Floodplain Managers (ASFPM) would like to offer some observations about the critical importance of investment in hazard mitigation. We did send a letter on December 19, 2012 making more specific points based on the then draft Senate Disaster Supplemental measure. A copy of that letter is attached because many of those points remain relevant to your discussion.

While state, local and other professional floodplain managers can understand the separation of elements of disaster assistance into two proposals, one being immediate response needs (H.R. 152), we are very concerned about the implication that hazard mitigation to reduce future losses is not an immediate need, and can be separated from response and recovery for the current disaster situations. Reactions to our nation’s natural disasters have repeatedly pointed to the importance of not just rebuilding in the same place and manner, but rebuilding smarter in order to reduce future losses and costs.

Hazard mitigation means taking steps to decrease long-term risk – and future losses – against known hazards. This can usually be most effectively accomplished in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. In the United States, the most common and costly hazard is flooding. The most popular flood hazard mitigation actions include elevating buildings above known flood elevations, relocating and/or demolishing them and returning the area to open space, floodproofing buildings and infrastructure, stormwater management activities to reduce flooding, and sometimes structural measures such as floodwalls, dune restoration, dams and levees.

Dedicated to reducing flood risk and losses in the nation.
Because communities and property owners are already making decisions on how and where to rebuild, they need to know if mitigation assistance programs will be funded and available to assist them with the costs of hazard mitigation. Many families and businesses working to rebuild from Hurricane Sandy want to rebuild higher or safer, but are now financially ruined and need cost sharing assistance. Unless we can show them there is assistance, the structures will be rebuilt to be just as vulnerable as they were before Sandy. We will have missed the opportunity to save them and all taxpayers these same huge costs from future disaster events, which we know will occur.

Costs associated with natural disasters continue to rise in the United States. If we, as a nation, are to reduce those costs to the federal, state and local governments and property owners, we must aggressively promote risk management and reduction through hazard mitigation when rebuilding. To wait several months while thousands of individual recovery decisions are made is to miss the opportunity to reduce future disaster costs.

Our observations regarding the Disaster Supplemental Appropriations measures are made from the perspective of using this opportunity to reduce future costs to the nation. Hazard mitigation is a wise investment that has been shown from independent studies to result in $4 in savings on future losses for every $1 invested. For flood disasters, the ratio is $5 for every $1 invested. A 2012 report by the State of Florida analyzing hazard mitigation projects and losses avoided after Tropical Storm Debby showed a 116% return on investment on these projects after one storm. Most of these projects were completed in 2011 costing $18.6 million, with Tropical Storm Debby occurring in 2012. Without hazard mitigation, damages to these projects sites would have cost almost $22 million and taxpayers would be paying these costs – again - through disaster assistance and the federal casualty loss tax deduction.

The 15,000 members of the Association of State Floodplain Managers and our 34 state chapters urge you to focus on ways that the appropriations package can reduce future loss of lives, property, jobs and economic vitality as well as reduce disaster related costs for all taxpayers. We support the hazard mitigation, conservation and risk management planning components of the amendment in the nature of a substitute that will apparently be offered to H.R. 152 on the House floor. We have been warned by scientists and weather experts to expect more frequent and more intense storms. Please provide strong leadership and support for meaningful hazard mitigation decisions during recovery from Sandy.

Thank you for considering our concerns and recommendations. ASFPM Executive Director Chad Berginnis would be glad to discuss any aspects of these letters with you. He can be reached at (608) 828-3000 or at cberginnis@floods.org.

Very Sincerely,

Sally McConkey
ASFPM Chair
Chad Berginnis
ASFPM Executive Director

Attachment: Sandy Supplemental--ASFPM letter to House 12-19-12_final.pdf

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