

**Written Testimony of Jack Waldorf, Executive Director
Western Governors' Association**

**Submitted to the United States House of Representatives
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Homeland Security
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Fiscal Year 2026 Appropriations

Chairman Amodei, Acting Ranking Member Underwood, and Members of the Subcommittee, the Western Governors' Association (WGA) appreciates the opportunity to provide written testimony on the appropriations and activities of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). WGA is an independent organization representing the Governors of the 22 westernmost states and territories. The Association is an instrument of the Governors for bipartisan policy development, information sharing and collective action on issues of critical importance to the western United States.

Western Governors recognize the importance of a close and productive working relationship between states and the federal government and understand that more effective intergovernmental cooperation depends on federal recognition of states as co-sovereigns and partners. The promotion of a greater partnership between states and the federal government is central to the mission of WGA and is reflected in WGA Policy Resolution 2024-01, Strengthening the State-Federal Relationship. On the subject of partnership, given the numerous federal programs, policies, and regulations directly affecting the collective states and territories, Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to direct federal agencies to improve their internal processes and coordinate with states and territories on federal policies and procedures, as well as integrate state and territorial data into federal programs, including for policymaking purposes. WGA policy resolutions 2024-05, Disaster Preparedness and Response, and 2024-04, Combating the Opioid Crisis, also communicate Governors' collective perspectives on matters within the purview of the Subcommittee.

The western United States has seen a significant increase in the frequency and cost of major disasters and extreme weather events. Since the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act was enacted, the average number of disaster declarations per fiscal year has increased 61 percent. In 2024, there were 179 disaster declarations: an average of a disaster declaration every two days. Twenty-seven of those disasters resulted in losses exceeding \$1 billion, and the two most expensive disasters had combined costs over \$138 billion. Natural disasters are a major liability whose costs continue to rise throughout the nation.

Certain types of disasters, particularly wildfires, are more frequent in the West than other parts of the nation and result in a devastating amount of damage. Since 2020, wildfires have affected over 36.5 million acres across the United States, an area equivalent to the size of the state of Illinois. Smoke from wildfires in western states affect the states downwind from a wildfire, often extending for thousands of miles. Recent analyses indicate that smoke exposure in the U.S. has increased 27-fold over the last decade. Furthermore, urban conflagrations such as

the recent fires in Los Angeles or the 2023 Maui fire emit plumes of toxic smoke which create public health risks that are even greater than traditional wildland fire smoke. The wildfire crisis is a national public and environmental health issue that is urgent and affects all Americans.

Some damage from wildfires and other disasters could be avoided or minimized if resources were directed to pre-disaster mitigation efforts. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Hazard Mitigation Assistance grant programs, including the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program, Flood Mitigation Assistance, Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, and Pre-Disaster Mitigation grant program, all play a significant role in western states' and territories' ability to help address the threat and reduce the damage of these disasters.

Hazard mitigation and risk reduction are cost-effective methods of reducing the effect of natural disasters and lowering costs associated with post-disaster restoration. In a 2019 study, the National Institute of Building Sciences found that every federal dollar spent in mitigation grants saved the American taxpayer six dollars in post-disaster spending. That level of return on investment cannot be overlooked or ignored, and Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to fully fund FEMA's various mitigation grant programs.

Unfortunately, not all disasters can be avoided, and post-disaster response and recovery programs are equally critical. FEMA programs like the Community Disaster Loan Program, Disaster Assistance, and the Fire Management Assistance Grants, should be adequately funded to enable states and territories to quickly respond to and recover from disasters. Similarly, Emergency Management Performance Grant Program (EMPG) funds are the primary funding source for local emergency managers, and funding for this program has effectively decreased due to inflation. Western Governors support increasing EMPG funding to expand state and territorial capacity to provide technical assistance and expedite reimbursement for FEMA public assistance applicants.

When managing disaster declarations, state and local governments coordinate billions of dollars in federal grants through FEMA. To help offset the administrative requirements of these grants, FEMA regulations allow recipients to utilize a percentage for management costs. These management costs, however, are limited to each specific disaster and regulations do not allow grantees to economize by managing workloads across all open disasters. Western Governors urge this Subcommittee to direct FEMA to allow grantees to utilize management costs across all open disasters, which will build recovery and mitigation capacity, incentivize disaster close-out, and reduce the costs of disasters.

Federal agencies conducting disaster recovery and assistance, as well as the programs which they administer, should receive adequate and consistent funding and allow Western Governors and their designated executive branch agencies to have critical input on where those funds are needed most. The lack of speed, certainty, and consistency in deployment of federal disaster funding is a hindrance to coordinated recovery efforts and effective utilization of public funds.

Rising rates of opioid overdoses and deaths also constitute an urgent public health and safety crisis. Reducing the effects of the opioid crisis involves stemming the supply of illegally produced opioids. Western Governors request that the Subcommittee direct U.S. Customs and Border Protection to work closely with Governors to combat illicit drug trafficking and the manufacturing and distribution of counterfeit medications. Western Governors also urge the Subcommittee to appropriate sufficient funding to agencies to provide financial support and reimbursement to states and territories for interdiction activities.

The Governors recognize the importance of these disaster and counterdrug programs for the nation and especially the West. The Subcommittee should carefully consider the funding needs of these programs as the number, severity, and overall cost of disasters continue to rise and public health and safety are increasingly threatened by the evolving opioid crisis.

Western Governors recognize the enormous challenge you have in balancing competing funding priorities and appreciate the difficulty of the decisions the Subcommittee must make. These recommendations are offered in a spirit of cooperation and respect, and WGA is prepared to assist you as the Subcommittee discharges its critical and challenging responsibilities.