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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

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October 16, 2017

The Honorable Ron Johnson
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs
U.S. Senate
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I write to request that you join me in conducting a bipartisan investigation and consider scheduling a series of Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee hearings to lay out the reality of the federal government's response to Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria.

In the span of four weeks, the three storms brought unprecedented devastation to communities in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and surrounding areas. Hurricane Harvey produced the largest single-storm rainfall totals recorded in U.S. history.¹ Winds from Hurricane Irma topped out at 185 miles per hour – the second fastest speeds ever recorded in the Atlantic Ocean.² The humanitarian crisis in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands is still unfolding. One week after Hurricane Maria made landfall, 97% of the 3.4 million U.S. citizens living in Puerto Rico were without power, and half had no running water.³ Over 90% of cellular communications sites were out of service, and eight of the 37 hospitals that had been assessed by the Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Defense were not operational.⁴

¹ *60 Inches of Rain Fell From Hurricane Harvey in Texas, Shattering U.S. Storm Record*, Washington Post (Sept. 22, 2017) (www.washingtonpost.com/news/capital-weather-gang/wp/2017/08/29/harvey-marks-the-most-extreme-rain-event-in-u-s-history/?utm_term=.00263c13ea36).

² *Just How Strong is Hurricane Irma?*, Scientific American (Sept. 6, 2017) (www.scientificamerican.com/article/just-how-strong-is-hurricane-irma/).

³ *Puerto Ricans Still Waiting for Aid a Week After Maria's Devastation*, CNN (Sept. 27, 2017) (www.cnn.com/2017/09/27/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria/index.html).

⁴ Federal Emergency Management Agency, *National Response Coordination Center Trifold – Hurricane Maria, As of September 27, 2017 (5:00 p.m. EDT)*.

Damage from the three disasters will likely well exceed \$300 billion, more than double the total economic damage wrought by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.⁵ As you are aware, Congress appropriated \$15.25 billion in disaster relief funding in the wake of Hurricane Harvey.⁶ However, that amount will be insufficient in meeting the monumental needs of affected communities. As of October 12, 2017, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had obligated more than \$10 billion on the response to and recovery from Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria.⁷ However, it is not just FEMA doing the work. Disaster response is an interagency effort. The Department of Defense, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Health and Human Services, Small Business Administration, and many other departments and agencies have played a pivotal role in the initial response to and recovery from Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria.

As the Senate Committee with primary jurisdiction over the efficiency and economy of operations of all branches of the federal government, it is imperative that we understand how pre- and post-disaster decision-making has been made and how public resources are being allocated. Congress's first responsibility in the wake of a natural disaster is to ensure that responding departments and agencies are fully resourced to carry out their life-saving and life-sustaining missions. As funding is expended, we have the dual obligation of ensuring that relief funds are reaching disaster victims in an effective and efficient manner and monitoring government spending in an effort to protect the interests of taxpayers.

In the 109th Congress, under Republican leadership, the full Committee held 21 hearings on Hurricane Katrina.⁸ Given the extent of the damage caused by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and

⁵ *AccuWeather Predicts Economic Cost of Harvey, Irma to be \$290 Billion*, AccuWeather (Sept. 11, 2017) (www.accuweather.com/en/weather-news/accuweather-predicts-economic-cost-of-harvey-irma-to-be-290-billion); *Hurricane Maria is a Nightmare for Puerto Rico's Economy*, CNN Money (Sept. 25, 2017) (money.cnn.com/2017/09/25/news/economy/hurricane-maria-economic-damage); Congressional Budget Office, *Potential Increases in Hurricane Damage in the United States: Implications for the Federal Budget* (June 2016). (www.cbo.gov/publication/51518).

⁶ Pub. L. No. 115-56 (2017).

⁷ Federal Emergency Management Agency, *DRF Major Declaration Fund Status, As of October 12, 2017*.

⁸ Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hearing on Recovering from Hurricane Katrina: The Next Phase*, 109th Cong. (Sept. 14, 2005) (S. Hrg. 109-399); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hearing on Recovering from Hurricane Katrina: Responding to the Immediate Needs of its Victims*, 109th Cong. (Sept. 28, 2005) (S. Hrg. 109-445); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: How is FEMA Performing its Mission at this Stage of the Recovery?*, 109th Cong. (Oct. 6, 2005) (S. Hrg. 109-467); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans: A Flooded City, A Chaotic Response*, 109th Cong. (Oct. 20, 2005) (S. Hrg. 109-482); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: Why did the Levees Fail?*,

Maria and the massive response and recovery operations that are underway, I ask that you not delay in scheduling hearings and joining me in a bipartisan investigation of this important topic.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

109th Cong. (Nov. 2, 2005) (S. Hrg. 109-526); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Always Ready: The Coast Guard's Response to Hurricane Katrina*, 109th Cong. (Nov. 9, 2005) (S. Hrg. 109-527); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: What can the Government Learn from the Private Sector's Response?*, 109th Cong. (Nov. 16, 2005) (S. Hrg. 109-538); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: Perspectives of FEMA's Operations Professionals*, 109th Cong. (Dec. 8, 2005) (S. Hrg. 109-591); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: Who's in Charge of the New Orleans Levees?*, 109th Cong. (Dec. 15, 2005) (S. Hrg. 109-616); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: Mississippi's Recovery*, 109th Cong. (Jan. 17, 2006) (S. Hrg. 109-711); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: Urban Search and Rescue in a Catastrophe*, 109th Cong. (Jan. 30, 2006) (S. Hrg. 109-757); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Challenges in a Catastrophe: Evacuating New Orleans in Advance of Hurricane Katrina*, 109th Cong. (Jan. 31, 2006) (S. Hrg. 109-735); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: Managing the Crisis and Evacuating New Orleans*, 109th Cong. (Feb. 1, 2006) (S. Hrg. 109-793); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: The Role of the Governors in Managing the Catastrophe*, 109th Cong. (Feb. 2, 2006) (S. Hrg. 109-804); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: Managing Law Enforcement and Communications in a Catastrophe*, 109th Cong. (Feb. 6, 2006) (S. Hrg. 109-807); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: The Defense Department's Role in the Response*, 109th Cong. (Feb. 9, 2006) (S. Hrg. 109-813); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: The Roles of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Federal Emergency Management Agency Leadership*, 109th Cong. (Feb. 10, 2006) (S. Hrg. 109-829); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: Waste, Fraud, and Abuse Worsen the Disaster*, 109th Cong. (Feb. 13, 2006) (S. Hrg. 109-731); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: The Homeland Security Department's Preparation and Response*, 109th Cong. (Feb. 15, 2006) (S. Hrg. 109-848); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: Recommendations for Reform*, 109th Cong. (Mar. 8, 2006) (S. Hrg. 109-863); Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: Stopping the Flood of Fraud, Waste, and Abuse*, 109th Cong. (Dec. 6, 2006) (S. Hrg. 109-930).

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Claire McCaskill". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Claire" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "McCaskill".

Claire McCaskill
Ranking Member