

**Written Testimony of Jack Waldorf, Executive Director
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Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Homeland Security
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Fiscal Year 2025 Appropriations

Chair Murphy, Ranking Member Britt, 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. WGA Policy Resolutions 2021-06, Disaster Preparedness and Response, and 2024-4, 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 number and cost of major disasters and extreme weather events. Between January 2020 and January 2023, there have been 463 major disaster or emergency declarations. Eighty-eight of those have resulted in costs exceeding \$1 billion each, totaling \$448 billion. Certain types of disasters are more frequent in the West than other parts of the nation, and result in a devastating amount of damage. Vast portions of the West continue to experience severe, extreme, or exceptional drought. These drought conditions devastate local communities and numerous economic sectors across the West. In addition to the agricultural and livestock industries that form the economic base of many western states, other sectors like manufacturing and outdoor recreation are also threatened by persistent drought conditions.

Drought conditions also pave the way for another disaster that is just as destructive, but far more deadly – wildfires. Since 2020, wildfires have affected over 27.5 million acres across the United States, with over 26 million of those acres in the West. This is almost equivalent to the size of the state of Ohio. Drought and wildfires in western states affect the air quality and public health outcomes of other states downwind from the wildfire, often extending for thousands of miles. Recent figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that over 128 million Americans were exposed to harmful levels of wildfire smoke over the past year. The wildfire crisis is a national issue that is not limited to western states.

For these reasons, DHS programs, particularly those related to pre- and post-disaster, play an enormous role in the viability of the West, not only in terms of its economic vitality, but also in its ecosystems, infrastructure, and general livability. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Hazard Mitigation Assistance grant programs, including the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities, Flood Mitigation Assistance, Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, and Pre-Disaster Mitigation, 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 give states and territories the ability to quickly respond to and recover from disasters.

Federal agencies should provide state, territorial, local, and tribal government officials with accessible and clear information on available federal resources and programs and the most effective utilization of those resources in disaster recovery. WGA has worked with federal partners to improve interagency coordination on post-wildfire restoration work, including a roadmap of assistance available to communities affected by wildfire and identification of "navigators" to help communities prioritize post-wildfire restoration needs. Western Governors urge the federal government to prioritize the funding of these important efforts, as they should have a positive effect on maximizing the value of restoration work and, more importantly, addressing the needs of communities affected by wildfire.

On the subject of data, given the numerous federal programs, policies, and regulations directly affecting the collective states and territories, Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to direct Congress and 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.

The cybersecurity of states, territories, and the nation is an utmost priority for Western Governors as well. We have seen an increase in vulnerabilities across systems as threat actors become more complex and widespread. In recent years, the Governors have witnessed an alarming acceleration of attacks targeting every level of government and spanning across critical infrastructure sectors. Western Governors support sufficient funding for the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and its functions, including the Office of Cybersecurity and Communications, CISA Central, and state, local, tribal, and territorial engagement.

Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to provide adequate funding for cybersecurity research and development. The actions required to ensure cybersecurity include implementing blockchain and encryption measures to defend against cyber threats, address vulnerabilities in emerging technologies, and provide robust support to states and territories to meet their election security requirements.

Just as important to Governors are counterdrug activities and support. Reducing the effect of the opioid crisis involves stemming the supply of illegally produced opioids. Western Governors urge the Subcommittee to appropriate sufficient funding to agencies in order to provide financial support and reimbursement to states and territories for interdiction activities – including through the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas program – and work closely with Governors to combat illicit drug trafficking and the manufacturing and distribution of counterfeit medications. Western Governors also urge the Subcommittee to direct Congress and the Administration to utilize available tools, including sanctions, against individuals and groups involved in the illicit production and distribution of fentanyl and other drugs.

The Governors recognize the importance these disaster, cybersecurity, and counterdrug programs have for the nation, and especially the West, and urge the Subcommittee to carefully consider the funding needs of these programs, especially as the number, severity, and overall cost of disasters and cyber incidents, as well as the myriad of drug crises, continue to rise.

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.