

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

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Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Homeland Security
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Fiscal Year 2024 Appropriations

Chairman Joyce, Ranking Member Cuellar, 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.

The western United States has seen a significant increase in the number and cost of major disasters and extreme weather events. Since 2020, there have been 379 major disaster or emergency declarations. Sixty of those have resulted in costs exceeding \$1 billion each, totaling \$402 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. Much of the West continues to experience extreme or exceptional drought. These drought conditions devastate local communities and the agricultural and livestock industries in the West. These conditions also pave the way for another disaster just as destructive, but far more deadly – wildfires. Since 2020, wildfires have affected over 17.2 million acres across the United States, with 15.2 million of those acres in the West. This is almost equivalent to the size of the state of West Virginia.

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 flora and fauna, its infrastructure, and its general livability. In terms of hazard mitigation, 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' 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 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.

Given the numerous federal agency programs, policies, and regulations directly affecting the collective states, agency coordination with states and the integration of state data into federal programs for policymaking is paramount to their success. Western Governors support full and consistent federal funding for agencies to carry out the requirements of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Pub. L. 115–435) and encourage the Subcommittee to direct federal agencies to improve their internal processes and coordinate with states on federal data policies and procedures, as required in the Act.

The cybersecurity of states 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 to meet their election security requirements.

The Governors recognize the importance these disaster and cybersecurity 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 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.