

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-2402

October 9, 2009

Dear Colleague:

Our country continues to battle natural disasters that have increased in frequency, severity, and cost to the federal government. In light of this fact, I strongly believe that the nation needs new policies and tools that emphasize pre-disaster planning and mitigation to help save lives, reduce injury, physical damage and recovery costs. For this reason, earlier this year I introduced three bills that will shift federal policy and resources in the direction of prevention and mitigation, will improve our country's disaster preparation, enhance our environmental stewardship and will reduce government and private recovery expenditures. The three bills, further summarized below, are: H.R. 3027, the Pre-disaster Hazard Mitigation Enhancement Program Act; H.R. 3028, the Hazard Mitigation For All Act; and H.R. 3026, the First Responder Innovation and Support Act. I ask that you review the bills and join me as a co-sponsor.

As the Chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, with jurisdiction over the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, I am very familiar with the benefits of pre-disaster mitigation and its human and financial cost savings. Homes that are "hardened"—that have impact resistant glass, storm shutters, roof straps, or other similar design features—have a better chance of protecting homeowners and surviving a natural disaster. Not only does mitigation save lives but the financial return on investment is significant. For example, a study by the National Institute of Building Sciences found that "a dollar spent on mitigation saves society \$4."

The three bills—the "pre-disaster mitigation package"—has been endorsed by SmarterSafer.org, a diverse ad-hoc coalition of consumer advocacy, taxpayer, environmental and insurance industry groups whose membership includes, among others, the National Wildlife Federation, American Rivers, Americans for Prosperity, the Sierra Club, Plan!tNow, and the Defenders of Wildlife. Though divergent in their policy viewpoints, members of the coalition are united around the straightforward principle that government and industry should do all we can to protect lives and property in advance of natural disasters

When enacted, the programs and initiatives contained in the pre-disaster mitigation package will result in tangible, effective, and long lasting "on-the-ground" benefits for homeowners, small businesses, residents of apartment buildings, and first responders. In particular, through grant funding administered by state and local officials and agencies, the legislation would provide mitigation assistance to low and moderate income families and the communities in which they reside. Assisting in mitigation activities for these communities ensures that lives will be saved and rebuilding costs to the federal government will decrease. Again, up front investments in mitigation are sound investments and represent a much wiser approach than current policies that are overly skewed toward post recovery expenditures or proposed federal bailouts.

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Below are brief summaries of the legislation that comprises the “pre-disaster mitigation package”:

The Predisaster Hazard Mitigation Enhancement Program Act of 2009 (H.R. 3027). The bill creates a \$100 million competitive grant award program to complement and bolster certain existing grant programs. The new program would be authorized for five years. This competitive grant program would provide states with funds for projects that have a direct, “on-the-ground” impact for low and moderate income homeowners and residents of single family dwellings, as well as for the residents of apartments and small business owners. The bill would fund mitigation activities, such as increasing the structural integrity of roof attachments, creating water barriers to prevent property flooding, and improving the resilience of natural disaster vulnerable openings. States would be required to deploy 50% of grant funds for projects that benefit single family homeowners and residents, 30% for projects that benefit multi-family or apartment building and residents, and 20% for projects that benefit small business owners. The distribution of grants funds would also take into account the severity and intensity of hurricanes and storms regionally. In addition, the bill would commission a study of methods to coordinate the use of natural storm buffers, such as natural landscapes and wetlands, with man-made storm buffers to provide maximum protection to vulnerable communities.

The Hazard Mitigation For All Act of 2009 (H.R. 3028). The bill would provide \$50 million in fiscal years 2010 to 2013 for predisaster mitigation activities for an often excluded segment of our population—residents of public housing authorities, recipients of Section 8 vouchers, and residents of assisted housing. These residents are among the most vulnerable when a hurricane, wind storm or similar natural disaster occurs, and protecting them should be at the forefront of our preparedness policies. Moreover, efforts to retrofit these residential buildings will save lives and reduce long-term taxpayer costs by reducing the need for costly reconstruction.

In administering this program, the Department of Housing and Urban Development could consider the regional severity and frequency of natural disasters in the grant award process. Further, HUD would be responsible for protecting the mitigation investment of the federal government by requiring that homeowners of private Section 8 or assisted housing-eligible property who accept grant funds give an admission preference to housing applicants for a period of five years.

The First Responder Innovation & Support Act of 2009 (H.R. 3026). This bill would provide \$100 million from fiscal year 2010 to 2015 for novel or innovative first responder grants. Innovative programs include projects to address special populations, such as children or the elderly, and projects that serve a particular community need, such as mobile nursing units for rural communities or wireless technologies to improve the interoperability of first responder networks—like that between FEMA and local police forces.

To save lives and protect property, federal policy should be forward looking—focusing on natural catastrophe preparedness that is centered on mitigation techniques and technology—instead of waiting until disaster strikes. Moreover, the policies embodied in H.R. 3026, H.R. 3027 and H.R. 3028 will go a long way toward not only alleviating our fiscal burdens but helping to reduce the potential inequities of post-catastrophe financing. To do otherwise, as we say in Mississippi, will be “pennywise but pound foolish”. Again, I welcome your support for the mitigation movement and your co-sponsorship. We were lucky this year. However, we should not be complacent nor should we wait until the next catastrophic storm, flood, hurricane, tornado, earthquake, or other natural disaster to adjust our policy. We must act now. To co-sponsor H.R. 3026, H.R. 3027 or H.R. 3028 contact Tara Smith at x55876 or email at tsmith@mail.house.gov .

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bennie G. Thompson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "B" and "T".

Bennie G. Thompson
Member of Congress