

**HEARING BEFORE THE COMMITTEE  
ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC  
WORKS, UNITED STATES SENATE,  
ONE HUNDRED THIRD CONGRESS,  
FIRST SESSION, NOVEMBER 9, 1993**

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S. HRG. 103-434

**FEDERAL RESPONSE TO THE MIDWEST FLOODS OF  
1993**

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Federal Response to the Midwest Flo...

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# C O N T E N T S

## OPENING STATEMENTS

	Page
Baucus, Hon. Max, U.S. Senator from the State of Montana .....	1
Boxer, Hon. Barbara, U.S. Senator from the State of California .....	2
Chafee, Hon. John H., U.S. Senator from the State of Rhode Island .....	5
Durenberger, Hon. Dave, U.S. Senator from the State of Minnesota .....	4

## WITNESSES

Bramhall, Ronald, Mayor, City of Keokuk, IA .....	28
Prepared statement .....	53
Dickey, Dr. G. Edward, Acting Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, U.S. Department of the Army; accompanied by Lieutenant General Arthur Williams, Chief of Engineers .....	40
Prepared statement .....	63
Dorrian, Pat, Mayor, City of Des Moines, IA .....	26
Prepared statement .....	51
Grassley, Hon. Charles E., U.S. Senator from the State of Iowa .....	6
Des Moines Register, article from .....	8
Grosboll, Allen, Executive Assistant, Office of the Governor, Springfield, IL .....	22
Prepared statement .....	48
Harkin, Hon. Tom, U.S. Senator from the State of Iowa .....	11
Prepared statement .....	46
Knobloch, Dennis, Village President, Valmeyer, IL .....	24
Prepared statement .....	50
Krimm, Richard, Acting Associate Director, Federal Emergency Management Agency .....	37
Prepared statement .....	58
Kruse, Charles, President, Missouri Farm Bureau Federation .....	30
Prepared statement .....	55
Moseley-Braun, Hon. Carol, U.S. Senator from the State of Illinois .....	13
Simon, Hon. Paul, U.S. Senator from the State of Illinois .....	10
Womack, Abner, Co-Director, Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute, University of Missouri .....	31
Prepared statement .....	56





## FEDERAL RESPONSE TO THE MIDWEST FLOODS OF 1993

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 1993

U.S. SENATE,  
COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:26 a.m. in room SD-406, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Max Baucus [chairman of the committee] presiding.

Present: Senators Baucus, Boxer, and Chafee.

### OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. MAX BAUCUS, U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF MONTANA

Senator BAUCUS. The hearing will come to order.

Good morning, everyone. I apologize to the witnesses for the delay. I like to be punctual. I was testifying at another hearing; a hearing on risk assessment held by Senator Johnston, Chairman of the Energy Committee.

Today the Environment and Public Works Committee will hear from a number of witnesses regarding this summer's flooding in the Midwest. Specifically, we'll focus on the response of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Corps of Engineers to that disaster.

The flood of 1993 was a devastating event of tremendous magnitude. The costs, not only in dollars but in human suffering, have yet to be fully realized. Disasters of this scope are well beyond the capabilities of State and local authorities and it is these types of events that require Federal action. That Federal response must be timely, efficient and produce the most benefits with the available resources. Both FEMA and the Corps have worked long and hard to respond to the needs of the flood victims.

While there is always room for improvement and lessons to be learned, I applaud the efforts of both of these agencies and, in fact, all of those who contributed to alleviating the suffering caused by the floods. None of us will ever forget the images of those desperately fighting the rising waters.

The flood raises important questions. For instance, should the Federal Government repair levees that have not been properly maintained or should we focus on the creation of nonstructural solutions like wetlands instead? Moreover, how do we pay for needed repairs to all levees with limited Federal resources?

My Senate colleagues from the affected States are here this morning to testify to the damage and destruction they have person-

ally witnesses. We will also hear from local officials and residents from Illinois, Iowa and Missouri, those who were on the front line fighting the rising tide of water.

While we are still feeling the effects of the floods, it is important that we take this time to hear from these witnesses so that we can assess Federal disaster assistance policy. In the next session of Congress, this committee will be working on the reorganization of FEMA and the reauthorization of the Corps. In order to assist us in this process, we need to clearly define those areas that may need improvement.

Many controversial issues have arisen due to the floods, including the Corps' flood control policies and FEMA's Relocation and Acquisition Program. These issues will be addressed during the reorganization and reauthorization of those agencies.

I must also mention the tragic events of the past two weeks in California. I was horrified to see the extent of the devastation and the loss of life brought about by the wildfires, especially in light of the fact that a majority of those fires were intentionally set. My colleague, Senator Boxer, will have some questions for FEMA regarding its response to the event. It is my intention to hold oversight hearings on the California wildfires in the next session. I look for to working with my colleague from California at that hearing.

Now, I'd like to turn to my colleague from California who has a statement she'd like to make.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. BARBARA BOXER, U.S. SENATOR  
FROM THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA**

Senator BOXER. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I am here to say that I am with you, my colleagues in whatever we can do. I know the Chairman feels very strongly about this. You can count on me as an ally and a friend.

I would like to very briefly address the wildfires that have claimed three lives and devastated nearly 200,000 acres. I know many of you have come out to California perhaps to these very areas and feel with me the pain when we look at the total devastation. Mr. Chairman, I do want to thank you for agreeing to hold an oversight hearing regarding the California wildfires and flood control as early as possible next year.

Almost all of the 26 wildfires are now under control or extinguished. We know most of them were caused by arsonists. We are taking action on the crime bill to up the penalties for arson. We need to do more in that regard. The Topanga Canyon blaze is nearly contained, the fires caused 160 injuries, mostly of firefighters who are the true heroes of this catastrophe.

The State Office of Emergency Services reports 863 homes were destroyed and hundreds more damaged. However, another threat looms on the horizon, Mr. Chairman, and that is the potential for mud slides and flooding when winter rains turn those burned out canyons into rivers of mud. There is a real threat and we could lose the very homes that we saved from the fire if the receding program fails. Fear over floods may seem paradoxical when you have a fire disaster, but fire of this intensity often creates soil conditions which prevent water from soaking into the soil. Heavy rains for a

short time or lighter rains over extended periods of time could saturate the ground causing soil to erode off the steep hillsides. This debris could be flushed into inlets and stream channels. This in turn could reduce the carrying capacity of the streams, raise the flood elevations spreading the flows over a greater area. Structures normally outside the usual flood hazard areas prior to the fire could face major flood damage from winter rains.

Because of the budget cuts and other factors, many debris dams used to trap the runoff are already full. Today, I urge the Army Corps to provide immediate assistance. I understand the Forest Service is interested in rehiring people from south central Los Angeles who were used for this kind of work before. This authority should be granted as soon as possible, and Mr. Chairman, I hope to talk to you and your staff about how we can do this. I don't think it requires additional funds; I think we just need to grant certain authority.

We are in a race to seed these hillsides before the rains come. Aerial reseedling began Sunday in the mountainous areas north of Altadena to establish vegetation on the fire-scarred hillsides as rapidly as possible. Communities of Altadena, Laguna Beach and Malibu are particularly threatened by excessive runoff according to the Soil Conservation Service, which has outlined a \$13-million emergency protection program to restore 85,000 acres. This plan, which addresses the initial 17 wildfires, includes \$7 million for seeding and mulching, \$3 million for installing hay bales, \$500,000 for clearing burned trees, \$1 million to assist urban groups and associations and \$1.2 million for Soil Conservation Service technical needs. The total Federal outlays are expected to be about \$9.7 million for the initial fires with the balance paid by State or local government. A second damage survey report is expected this week to account for last week's blaze.

I urge FEMA to move as soon as possible to compile its hazard mitigation report which will recommend actions to lessen such a disaster reoccurred. We need to look closely at the need for controlled burns and other measures to dampen the destructive effect of wildfires in the future. The State finally approved building fire standards in legislation passed last year, but they don't take effect until 1995.

Before I close, I would like to mention my appreciation for the work of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Mr. Chairman, as a Congresswoman, I went through five disasters in my congressional district. I want to say that I had to push and prod and cajole FEMA to act in the spirit and the letter of the law. I am very pleased to tell you that this is a new FEMA and they have performed very well. This FEMA, under the new Administration, has removed that blotch on the Federal Government from past years when it stepped in to help. When FEMA Director James Lee Witt says, "I'm from the Federal Government and I'm here to help"—and he says it with an Arkansas accent—people of California are getting to know that accent and are getting to know James Lee Witt. There are no smirks because he means it when he says he's going to help, and he has provided that help.

Two days after the President declared five California counties disaster areas, FEMA was able to establish four disaster centers to