

Statement of Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Thu, July 21, 2011

Aloha and welcome to the Committee's oversight hearing on "Facing Floods and Fires: Emergency Preparedness for Natural Disasters in Native Communities."

This is an incredibly important issue to tribes and Native peoples. In just the past few months, Native communities in New Mexico, Montana, Washington, Nebraska, and South Dakota have faced floods, fires, tornados, and severe storms. Lives were lost, homes destroyed, and sacred sites endangered.

I have a lifetime of experience in dealing with the effects of natural disasters. In the middle of the Pacific Ocean, Hawaii can be affected by disasters all around the Pacific Rim.

Hawaii was reminded of its vulnerability in March when a tsunami warning and evacuations were issued following the devastating earthquake in Japan. Small tropical storms can quickly turn into hurricanes, and devastate whole communities and islands.

Hawaii also experiences thousands of earthquakes from volcanic activity every year. They can cause loss of life, property, and electricity throughout the islands.

Disasters like these can have lasting effects on people, personally, financially, and emotionally, and can undermine our sense of community and safety.

In Hawaii, we have learned time and time again, the value of being prepared, and the importance of quick and coordinated responses when a natural disaster strikes.

We have the same fears for the safety of our people as other Native communities and some of the same frustrations dealing with coordination and collaboration. In Hawaii, we have to coordinate federal, state, and local efforts among the seven inhabited islands.

Here in the continental United States, tribes deal with at least that many agencies in getting aid to their people and communities.

Today's hearing is a true oversight hearing. We invited six federal witnesses to be with us so the Committee can examine the role of each agency in responding to natural disasters. We want to hear what is working well and where improvements are needed.

We will also hear from a tribal witness who knows first-hand the devastating effects of natural disasters.

From this hearing, we hope to identify ways the federal response can be improved - both administratively and legislatively - so tribes can prepare for and respond to natural disasters in a

way that protects their members, their infrastructure, their cultural resources, and their homelands.