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May 30, 2025

The Honorable Sam Graves, Chair The Honorable Rick Larsen, Ranking Member Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure U.S. House of Representatives 2165 Rayburn House Office Building Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Graves and Ranking Member Larsen

I am writing on behalf of the more than 160, 000 members of the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE)¹ to thank you for leadership and sharing the draft bill, The Fixing Emergency Management for Americans (FEMA) Act of 2025. The Federal government is a vital partner in disaster response and mitigation and ASCE supports your efforts to revitalize and improve the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The role and function of FEMA has evolved over the years, and it is necessary to turn a critical eye to its functions and processes and to make needed changes, while preserving the vital function it serves.

Communities across the nation face growing risks from natural and human-caused disasters. Recent disaster events have highlighted the nation's vulnerabilities and illustrate the need for all levels of government to share in the responsibility of preparing for and mitigating against the risks they pose. ASCE firmly supports an emergency planning framework that allows for the coordination of local, state, and federal agencies. Furthermore, while there are ways to improve and streamline the vital work FEMA undertakes, it must be noted that it is critical for FEMA to act as the lead federal agency in disaster response and disaster hazards mitigation going forward.

Since 1979, FEMA has provided coherent, coordinated, and effective disaster relief and over time it has become the main arm of national emergency preparedness. FEMA

¹ Founded in 1852, ASCE is the country's oldest civil engineering organization. Representing civil engineers from private practice, government, industry, and academia, it is ASCE's objective to advance the science and profession of engineering to enhance the welfare of humanity. ASCE is a leader in hazard mitigation efforts aimed at protecting public health, safety, and welfare. ASCE develops and maintains standards that provide technical guidelines for promoting safety, reliability, productivity, and efficiency in civil engineering. Many of our standards are referenced by model building codes and adopted by state and local jurisdictions.

provides disaster assistance, supports recovery efforts, and helps communities become more resilient to future events. While state and local agencies are the primary responders, FEMA offers crucial funding and resources when disaster-related damage exceeds local capacity.

Without FEMA or other federal support, states would have to manage disaster response and recovery on their own. Unfortunately, states prone to frequent disasters would face expensive and often seasonal losses, likely exacerbating recovery delays, impacting the safety and well-being of impacted communities, and reducing the overall resilience of states repeatedly hit by multi-million disasters. Additionally, smaller states that lack the financial resources and logistical capabilities to respond effectively would also be disproportionately affected, increasing risks for residents in impacted communities. While states might be able to arrange regional cooperation, state-led responses and regional models have limitations. These limitations would be felt acutely in the lack of fast financial aid for residents and communities, as well as limited housing, supplies, relief, or long-term recovery options, all which come at a cost that often far exceeds state budgets.

In fact, across the U.S., disasters of greater intensity, duration, and frequency have wreaked havoc on communities of every size and location and have required assistance from FEMA to protect public health and safety. In 2024 alone, a total of 27 extreme weather events caused 568 deaths and over \$182 billion in damages; since 1980, the U.S. has experienced 403 events amounting to at least \$1 billion in damages with a total cost exceeding \$2.9 trillion. In addition to life and property losses, disasters strike assets across the infrastructure network, including buildings, roads, bridges, electrical lines, water resources such as dams and levees, and rail. Severe flooding, wind, fire, snow, ice, and earthquakes damage and destroy these critical lifelines for residents, businesses, and communities at large. Measures to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters have led to an increased focus on resilience. The costs associated with building stronger infrastructure and structures demonstrate prudent investment. Every dollar spent on resilience and preparedness saves communities \$13 in post-disaster costs, according to a 2024 study.

With this in mind, ASCE continues to stress the importance of investing in the resilience of the nation's infrastructure to save money and lives in the long term, and we are pleased to see a continued focus on resilience in the draft legislation. As the profession most responsible for the built environment, ASCE understands that resilience is critical to protecting public health, safety, the environment as well as the economy. ASCE's *2025 Report Card for America's Infrastructure* graded the condition of 18 categories of the Nation's infrastructure and awarded an overall grade of "C", the highest grade in the 27 years of the Report Card's existence. Among the key recommendations to continue this improvement is an emphasis on resilience, where more work is needed to protect communities against the impacts of extreme weather events. Better outcomes can be realized in disaster recovery and response through project planning and development that prioritizes resilience. This practice enables policymakers to ensure public dollars are used efficiently over a project's lifespan.

Unfortunately, the current Administration discontinued the Building Resilience Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program, a key program for building resilience into communities. ASCE is concerned by this decision and believes programs like BRIC are sound investments that ultimately create significant savings for individual taxpayers, as well as local, state, and the federal governments. Cuts to BRIC and other FEMA grants and programs will likely prove costly in the long-term because the adoption and enforcement of current building codes and standards remain two of the most effective risk mitigation measures a jurisdiction can undertake.

The detrimental impacts of disasters from recent history, along with the billions of dollars in taxpayer resources expended to facilitate recovery, could have been significantly reduced or even prevented with more consistent and frequent adoption and implementation of building codes. FEMA's 2020 report "Building Codes Save: A Nationwide Study," found that adopting the then-current version of the International Codes (I-Codes) would save the U.S. \$600 billion over the next four decades. The adoption and implementation of building codes is a proven low cost, high impact mitigation strategy and ASCE is pleased to see incentives to that effect included in the draft bill.

ASCE is also pleased to see an emphasis on cutting red tape and speeding relief funding. However, we wish to emphasize the unique and critical role the federal government must play during the disaster response. The major disaster response system is a complex, multi-layered approach involving federal, state, and local agencies, as well as non-governmental organizations and the private sector. Future legislation should focus on improving and streamlining FEMA central coordinating role and ensuring that the response is effective and organized. The resources that FEMA brings to major disasters cannot be replicated at the state level, in the same way local knowledge and resources must be supported for a competent response.

The draft directs FEMA to improve coordination across all federal agencies involved in disaster recovery. This is an essential function that needs to be well-defined. In addition to local and state agencies, numerous federal agencies ultimately become involved in disaster recovery, each with their own focus and processes. The poor coordination is a major obstacle to effective recovery and rebuilding.

The act proposes reforms to streamline permitting, reduce reliance on costly consultants, and incentivize states to make their own investments in mitigation and insurance. ASCE strongly supports efforts to streamline permitting and reduce costs in the grants and disaster process. While a balanced approach which reflects the best available science is necessary, inefficient review and approval processes can harm implementation of infrastructure projects that may improve public safety and generate economic growth. ASCE supports permitting reform efforts that will reduce approval processing times, establish reasonable time limitations for legal challenges, and designate a lead entity for federal project review.

The draft also directs FEMA to create a centralized public website to track disaster funding. Concerns over FEMA's current information dissemination centers on the timeliness, clarity, and accuracy of information provided to the public and other

stakeholders. Specific challenges include rigid planning structures, limited community engagement, and the exclusion of vulnerable groups. Overly complex reporting structures and fragmented information systems also hinder effective data sharing. Clarity and transparency would go a long way to restoring public trust in FEMA as well as improving the ability of the public to receive the aid needed.

Once again, thank you for your leadership in considering the improvements needed while recognizing the critical role FEMA plays in the nation's ability to prepare for and recover from the impacts of disasters. If we can be of further service, please do not hesitate to contact Martin Hight, ASCE Senior Manager for Government Relations at <u>mhight@asce.org</u>.

Sincerely,

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Caroline Sevier Managing Director, Government Relations and Infrastructure Initiatives