

Administration of Donald J. Trump, 2018

Remarks Following a Briefing on Hurricane Florence Preparedness Efforts and an Exchange With Reporters

September 11, 2018

The President. Okay, thank you very much. I've received a briefing from Secretary Nielsen, Administrator Long, and my senior staff regarding Hurricane Florence and other tropical systems that will soon impact the United States and its Territories. The safety of American people is my absolute highest priority. We are sparing no expense. We are totally prepared. We're ready. We're as ready as anybody has ever been.

And it looks to me, and it looks to all of—a lot of very talented people that do this for a living, like this is going to be a storm that's going to be a very large one, far larger than we've seen in perhaps decades. Things can change, but we doubt they will at this stage. It's a pretty late stage. We doubt they're going to be veering very far off course.

The places that are in the way and in the most jeopardy would be Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina—that area. And again, they haven't seen anything like what's coming at us in 25, 30 years—maybe ever. It's tremendously big and tremendously wet. Tremendous amounts of water.

So I've spoken with the Governors of South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia. They're prepared. We're prepared. We're working very well in conjunction with the Governors.

I'd like to ask Brock Long, our Administrator, who's done so well for us in Texas and Florida. We have something that could very well be very similar to Texas, in the sense that it's tremendous amounts of water. Texas was the one that had, I would say, to this point, Brock, probably more water than we've ever seen in a storm or a hurricane. And it went out for seconds and thirds. We've never seen anything like it.

But FEMA, as you know, did a fantastic job. And a fantastic job also in Florida. And I'd like to ask Brock, if you would, to just say a few words to the media as to where it is now, what's going to be happening, and how well prepared we are.

Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator W. Brock Long. Thank you, Mr. President. Unfortunately, Hurricane Florence is setting out to be a devastating event to the Carolinas and potentially Virginia as well.

So as you can see, they're forecasting a major landfalling storm—category 3 or 4 storm at landfall. The biggest hazard that we're worried about is storm surge. That's the primary driver of the evacuations that are underway by the States of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia right now. But as this system comes in and makes landfall, during the weekend it's forecast to stall out, lose its steering currents, and drop copious amounts of rainfall.

Unfortunately, the remnants of Gordon passed through the Mid-Atlantic over the weekend and dropped a lot of rain, saturating rivers. So, Hurricane Florence, as it comes in and puts anywhere between 20 and 30 inches more in isolated areas, could create a lot of inland flooding.

So, right now, sir, we're supporting the Governors with achieving their life safety evacuation movements. We're focused on mass care and sheltering, and then, we'll be focused on helping them to execute their response-and-recovery goals.

The President. What are the chances that it veers off course and, you know, the hit won't be so direct? What are the chances of that?

Administrator Long. Unfortunately, I believe there's quite a bit of certainty in the track forecast because the forward speed is picking up. It's getting faster. And when systems do that, the track forecast becomes a lot more accurate. And I think the expectation needs to be set with the citizens in this area that if you've been asked to leave, get out of the areas that are going to flood and get into a facility that can withstand the winds.

Let's set the expectations as well: This has an opportunity of being a very devastating storm. The power is going to be off for weeks. You're going to be displaced from your home in the coastal areas. And there will be flooding in the inland areas as well.

So these are going to be statewide events. The hazards will be statewide.

The President. Thanks. You wanted to show us this one then?

[*The President pointed to a graphic showing the storm's projected impact.*]

Administrator Long. Yeah. This is a seven-day rainfall graphic. As you can see, the pink areas and the purple areas indicate 20 inches. That's mean area rainfall; that's an average rainfall amount. But you may see isolated amounts greater, into the 30-inch range, over Virginia, the central portions of Virginia, and West Virginia. And these impacts are—they're going to be through the Mid-Atlantic. So we're coordinating not only with South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, but other Mid-Atlantic States, all the way to Delaware.

The President. Good. And it has been great coordination. I have to tell you, the States have been terrific. Everybody is working together. The Governors and all of their representatives have been absolutely fantastic. And FEMA, there's nobody like you people. They—I mean, what they're doing is incredible.

Do you have any questions for Secretary Nielsen or for Brock Long, please? Anybody?

Federal Response to Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico

Q. What lesson do we take from what happened in Puerto Rico? How do we apply the lessons we took from Puerto Rico on this?

The President. Well, I think Puerto Rico was incredibly successful. Puerto Rico was, actually, our toughest one of all because it's an island, so you don't—you can't truck things onto it. Everything is by boat. We moved a hospital into Puerto Rico, a tremendous military hospital in the form of a ship. You know that.

And I actually think—and the Governor has been very nice. And if you ask the Governor, he'll tell you what a great job. I think probably the hardest one we had, by far, was Puerto Rico because of the island nature. And I actually think it was one of the best jobs that's ever been done with respect to what this is all about.

Puerto Rico got hit not with one hurricane, but with two. And the problem with Puerto Rico is, their electric grid and their electric generating plant was dead before the storms ever hit. It was in very bad shape. It was in bankruptcy. It had no money. It was largely—you know, it was largely closed.

And when the storm hit, they had no electricity—essentially before the storm. And when the storm hit, that took it out entirely.

The job that FEMA and law enforcement and everybody did, working along with the Governor in Puerto Rico, I think was tremendous. I think that Puerto Rico was an incredible, unsung success.

Texas, we had been given A-plusses for. Florida, we've been given A-plusses for. I think, in a certain way, the best job we did was Puerto Rico, but nobody would understand that. I mean,

that's—it's harder to understand. It was very hard—a very hard thing to do because of the fact they had no electric. Before the storms hit, it was dead, as you probably know.

So we've gotten a lot of receptivity, a lot of thanks for the job we've done in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico is very important.

And by the way, speaking of Puerto Rico, they're going to be affected, pretty much, pretty soon by something else that's on its way. Is that right?

Administrator Long. Potentially, Hurricane Isaac right now is tracking south of the island, but we are—we have several thousand people inside Puerto Rico right now working on long-term recovery that have shifted to the response mode to monitor as Isaac passes to the south.

The President. We do not want to see Hurricane Isaac hit Puerto Rico. That's all we need. But we have a big hurricane out there, and it's sort of skirting along Puerto Rico and the edge of Puerto Rico. That would not be good.

Hurricane Florence Preparedness Efforts

Q. Mr. President, how much money do you think you'll need for recovery efforts to this next hurricane? And do you have that already, or do you need to get it?

The President. Well, we have it currently. Obviously, these are all unanticipated, so we'll go to Congress. Congress will be very generous, because we have no choice. This is the United States. And it's—whether it's Texas or Florida or, frankly, if it's Virginia—because Virginia, it's looks like it's very much in the path. Maryland, by the way, could be affected—very seriously affected—just to add. It's a little bit outside of the path. And then, of course, South Carolina and North Carolina. I think that any amounts of money, whatever it takes, we're going to do.

But we're already set up. We have tremendous trucking systems, we have food systems. We have a lot of contractors waiting. But for the most part, it's been handled by FEMA, and also, we've coordinated locally. We have food for days. We have emergency equipment and generators for many days. We should be in great shape.

Now, I've also heard it could be 21 and 22 inches. If you can imagine what that is: 22 inches of rain. It is not something that we've had. Certainly, we've never had this on the East Coast. So—but I think we're very well prepared, very well set up. Wouldn't you say?

Administrator Long. Yes. I think this storm right here is very similar to Hurricane Hugo and almost like a combination of Hurricane Hugo in '89 and Hurricane Floyd in 1999.

But look, successful disaster response and recovery is one that's locally executed, State-managed, and Federally supported. So what FEMA is doing is prepositioning the federal government's assets to support each one of those Governors that are about to be impacted with achieving their response-and-recovery goals. And that's the way emergency management and disaster response works best.

I also think—I'd like to point out that what we learned last year is we have got to build a true culture of preparedness within our citizens here in America. This is a partnership, and it takes anything from neighbor helping neighbor all the way to the Federal Government when it comes to correctly responding and recovering.

Hurricane Florence Preparedness Efforts

Q. Mister, can we ask you about the reasons for power outages? And what things are being done right now to stave them?

Administrator Long. That's a great question. So FEMA doesn't own the power grids in any one of these States. A lot of them are owned by the private industry. So what we have are business emergency operation center calls. We're concentrating with the private vendors to make sure that they have strong mutual aid programs in place. And we set up incident support bases to help stage power crews coming in from other States. And largely, it's FEMA's job to get out of the way to make sure that the private power companies can get into these areas to set up their grid. We don't own it. We don't own it.

The President. But unlike Puerto Rico, you have very strong power companies. They're very powerful, very well managed in the sense that they have—they have tremendous overcapacity. They are going to do a great job. They also have made contracts with other power companies that won't be affected, and they're going to be coming in—just to answer your question, they'll be coming in to the various States that will be affected.

They're going to be coming in very strongly, and they're already lining up. They'll be here probably, for the most part, tomorrow, or shortly before the storm hits. So they're going to be in great shape. These are, really, States that have very, very strong power authorities.

Hurricane Florence Preparedness Efforts

Q. What's your message, Mr. President, to people who might not have evacuated yet?

The President. Well, it's very risky. I mean, again, we've never seen anything quite like this, on the East Coast, at least. And if it turns out to be as bad—you know, we go out there; you have people that actually go fly through these storms. These are very brave people. But they fly through.

And from what I'm hearing, the sights that they're seeing have not been seen on the East Coast before. So I would say everybody should get out. I mean, you have to listen to your local authorities and—whether you're upland or downland. But depending on where you are, you have to listen and you have to get out. If they want you to get out—because it's going to be impossible to have people get in there, whether it's law enforcement or FEMA or anybody else. Once this thing hits, it's going to be really, really bad along the coast. Okay?

Anything else?

Washington Post Associate Editor Bob Woodward's Book Titled "Fear"

Q. Do you believe Rob Porter and Gary Cohn's denials today?

The President. Ah, well, you shouldn't be talking about that right now, because it doesn't matter. But I really appreciate their statement. Their statement was excellent. And they both sent out beautiful—which shows that the book is just a piece of fiction.

Thank you very much. I think we're very well prepared. And thank you all very much. Appreciate it.

China-U.S. Trade/Canada-U.S. Trade

Q. Do you mind giving us an update on the trade talks?

The President. Trade talks are coming along very well. We're dealing with China, as you know. We've taken a very tough stand on China, I would say, to put it mildly. And with Canada, they want to make a deal very much. Me? If we make it, that's good. And if we don't make it, that's okay too. Canada wants to make a deal. We'll see if we can get them into the deal we already have with Mexico. I think the deal with Canada is coming along very well, and we've all been dealing in good faith. Okay?

Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:13 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Henry D. McMaster of South Carolina; Gov. Roy A. Cooper III of North Carolina; Gov. Ralph Northam of Virginia; Gov. Ricardo A. Rosselló Nervares of Puerto Rico; former White House Staff Secretary Robert R. Porter; and former National Economic Council Director Gary D. Cohn.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Hurricane Florence, preparedness efforts; Interviews With the News Media : Exchange with reporters :: White House.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Cohn, Gary D.; Cooper, Roy A. III; Long, W. Brock; McMaster, Henry D.; Nervares, Ricardo A. Rosselló; Nielsen, Kristjen M.; Northam, Ralph S.; Porter, Robert R.

Subjects: Canada : Trade with U.S.; China : Trade with U.S.; Commerce, international : Free and fair trade; Energy : Infrastructure and grid improvements; Florida : Hurricane Irma, damage and recovery efforts; Homeland Security, Department of : Emergency Management Agency, Federal; Homeland Security, Department of : Secretary; Mexico : Trade with U.S.; Natural disasters : Hurricane Florence; Natural disasters : Hurricane Irma; Natural disasters : Hurricane Isaac; Natural disasters : Hurricane Maria; Natural disasters : Preparedness efforts; Natural disasters : Response and recovery efforts; North Carolina : Governor; Puerto Rico : Governor; Puerto Rico : Hurricane Maria, damage and recovery efforts; South Carolina : Governor; Texas : Hurricane Harvey, damage and recovery efforts; Transportation : Infrastructure, national, improvement efforts; Virginia : Governor.

DCPD Number: DCPD201800589.