

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks on the Federal Government Response to the Wildfires in Maui, Hawaii, and Hurricane Idalia and an Exchange With Reporters

August 30, 2023

The President. Hey, everybody. Folks, thanks for being here.

Earlier today I made a point to speak to all the Governors most likely to be impacted by this storm. I spoke with Governor DeSantis several times, Governor Kemp, Governor McMaster, Governor Cooper about the impacts of the storm and—that made landfall at 7:45 this morning as a category 3 hurricane.

And it has moved over land. It has now shifted to a category 1, but it is still very dangerous, with winds up to 75 miles an hour. And the impacts of this storm are being felt throughout the Southeast, even as it moves up the eastern coast of the United States, affecting Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. And we have to remain vigilant. And there's much more to do.

I just came from the Oval Office, where I met with the FEMA Administrator, who is standing to my left here, and our Federal response folks.

And early Monday morning, long before the storm made landfall, I spoke with Governor DeSantis and approved an early request for emergency declaration to enable him to have the full support ahead of time to protect the peoples' lives in the State of Florida.

I—we surged personnel to Florida to help the State move people quickly to safety and out of the danger zone and to help the Governor and his team to the greatest degree possible in advance—in advance—of the hurricane's arrival.

And I directed the FEMA to redeploy [predeploy; White House correction] resources, including up to 1,500 personnel and 900 Coast Guard personnel, throughout the Southeast.

I directed Administrator Criswell to stay in close touch with the Governor, and she was with me when I was speaking to him as well. And I guess he's maybe tired of hearing both of us, but he seemed like he welcomed it.

As a matter of fact, I have asked that she get on a plane and leave for Florida this afternoon. She'll meet with Governor DeSantis tomorrow and begin helping, conducting the Federal assessment at my direction.

Federal teams on the ground are going to continue to work with the first responders in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina to get people to safety. You've all been reporting this; you've seen it on television. There are a number of rescues already taking place—as I walked out of my office a moment ago—to begin to recover from the impacts of this storm.

I let each Governor I spoke with know, if there's anything—anything—the States need right now, I am ready to mobilize that support of what they need.

I don't think anybody can deny the impact of the climate crisis anymore. Just look around: historic floods—I mean historic floods; more intense droughts; extreme heat; significant wildfires have caused significant damage like we've never seen before. It's not only throughout the Hawaiian Islands and the United States, but in Canada and other parts of the world. We've never seen this much fire.

And while we're dealing with this latest extreme weather event, I remain laser-focused on recovering and rebuilding efforts in Maui. We were out there, and many of you were there as well. It's devastating what happened there.

When I took office, I directed my team to raise our game in how we lead and coordinate our responses to natural disasters—and because I've been around a while, and I've known how these function—to ensure we met the people where they are when they need our help the most.

Because of the devastation of wildfires—from California to New Mexico, Oregon, Washington State, Idaho, and Louisiana—we've learned a heck of a lot. A lot of damage in the meantime, but we've learned a heck of a lot. And we're putting the lessons we've learned to work.

In a few moments, I'm going to meet with my entire Cabinet in the next room over who are leading the Federal recovery and rebuilding efforts and report on their progress in providing urgently needed support to the people of Maui.

If I can note for—just parenthetically for just a moment: You know, when you have your home washed away, when you are—a fire has taken your home away, when your school has been destroyed, and there's no way you can—you can't send your kid to school, these are urgent needs. And no matter how bright, how informed, how wealthy, how poor they are, it's—they just need reassurance—said, "How in God's name am I going to get through this?"

Well, Jill and I saw the devastation in Maui firsthand.

And I want to thank Governor Josh Green, who is doing one hell of a job, along with their congressional delegation—there's total unity out there—and for everything they're doing to support the recovery effort.

I directed my team to do everything we can for as long as it takes to help Maui recover and rebuild in a way that respects and honors Hawaiian traditions and cultures and the needs of the local community. We're not going to turn this into a new land grab. We're not trying to have—see multimillion-dollar homes on the beach.

We want to restore that part of the island like it was before, only better.

To that end, when I was on the island last week, I appointed Bob Fenton, one of the Nation's leading emergency managers—and I mean that; that's not hyperbole—who has been on the ground in Hawaii since before the fires erupted—as our Chief Federal Response Coordinator to lead our long-term recovery on Maui.

I've charged him with making sure the community has everything—everything the Federal Government can offer to heal and build back better as fast as possible. You know, he'll be giving me a report virtually on Maui when I walk out of this room and go to the Cabinet Room, where I'm meeting in just a few minutes.

And as an example of our commitment, we're not only building back, but we're going to build back stronger and more resilient future, which means we need to be ready to withstand any challenge coming our way and rebuilding the way that Maui wants to rebuild—the nature of the rebuilding.

Today I'm announcing that \$95 million from the bipartisan infrastructure law is on the way to Hawaii to harden the ground power—harden the grid we talk about.

I know when we start talking about "the grid," the average American out there thinks, "What are we talking about?" Well, the ability to transmit electricity. Well, let me tell you what it means: It means investments to make sure electricity can continue to reach homes, hospitals, water stations, even during intense storms and extreme weather.

The funding will be used for stronger and better poles holding up the wires that transmit the electricity. It will mean stronger material. It will mean burying these lines that transmit the electricity underground. It's more expensive to do that. But where possible, we should put them underground; they're safest. It means clearing trees and brush around these wires. It's like the kindling is—that exists out there, it—that's what it ends up being when one of those wires come down.

And this funding is going to pay for installing technology—technology like smart meters that can tell you where the problem actually is when the line goes down. That's part of the problem: A lot of these and other—not Hawaii's—Maui is not that big, but in parts of California, Oregon, and all these places where these fires were—where did the wire go down?

So we're going to be installing meters to let the person sitting back in headquarters know, "Whoa, it went down at such and such a coordinates, such and such a pole" to enable emergency responders to more quickly identify which lines are damaged and are down so repairs can happen as quickly as possible and we get the power back on and prevent damage from occurring. Anything else—and anything else at our disposal.

The Department of Energy—you know, Secretary, we're going to be talking about this in a minute—accelerated the announcement of this funding to meet the moment. All this is going to help Maui and the entire State of Hawaii better withstand future disasters. Because this is not going away. It's not like, "Well, these are the last disasters."

We know this works—and I've watched some of you folks for—standing in front of me on television, in dangerous circumstances, reporting on this stuff. You know it. It's one thing to look at it on television and hear someone else report it, but you're standing there, and you're wondering, "Whoa, what's that behind me?" You know, it makes a difference.

You know, because we've—you know, we've done it before. Look, under the Obama-Biden administration, we invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the State of Florida, replacing wooden power poles with steel poles and to build—and we buried these electric lines. Well, I wonder what would happen now if we hadn't done that. I'm not sure what.

But the point is, we did it, and it helped them restand—withstand and recover from disasters more quickly than they otherwise would have. So it works. It costs a lot of money, but it works. But it saves a lot of money long term.

When Jill and I visited Maui last week, we saw firsthand the magnitude of the loss. Your lives have been dramatically changed. If anybody in Maui is listening, you've got—you've lost everything. I mean, they lost everything. And we're doing everything we can to move heaven and earth to help you recover, rebuild, and return to your lives.

We've already—have dedicated \$24 million to the removal of hazardous material left behind when the—in the fire's wake. There's pollution that is in that material. A lot of that you just can't go in and take bulldozers and clear it all out. You've got to take the bad stuff out. You've got to take out the polluted—the dangerous stuff. And we—and once we've done that, we'll be able to remove all of the debris.

But it's going to be frustrating as the devil for people. They're going to say: "Why can't I go back? The storm is over. Why can't I go back and look to see if I can find that wedding ring or why I can't find that album, can't find that thing that I've lost in the house?" It's really tough—really, really tough.

I didn't know anything like that, but I—lightning struck my house. We had to be out of that house for about 7 months while it was repaired because so much damage was done to the house and half the house almost collapsed. You know, and you wonder what's going to happen.

We've already dedicated \$400 million to pay for the debris removal once we get the toxic stuff out—to take all the removal. And we're going to—the Federal Government is going to pay for that. The State is not paying for that. And we're going to dedicate more if necessary.

But I want to be clear with the people of Maui about what to expect: The work we're doing is going to take time. In some cases, a long time. We're going to do it in a way to make sure we're respectful to the wishes and the traditions of the people of Hawaii as well.

The process of removing hazardous materials and cleaning the environmental damage means folks can't get back in the area right away. The start of school has been disrupted. It's painful. I get it.

But what can I tell you? The one thing I can tell you is that we're going to be with you every step of the way. We're not walking away.

When Jill and I visited, we were struck by the absolute courage of the people there—people who lost loved ones, lost everything. People are just trying to find out whether the ones they lost are lost. Are they gone, are they dead, are they missing, or are they just not accountable? Where are they? They've lost everything.

Everywhere we turned, we saw and felt the "aloha spirit"—neighbors helping neighbors. I mean, it—I know this sounds kind of corny, but it's true. It's true. Everybody is reaching out, trying to help the other guy, turning pain into purpose, and keeping the faith.

I'm directing my administration to continue working with urgency and focus to help the people of Maui on their journey to recovery and healing. And we are going to make you are healed and you're in better shape than before.

I said when I was on the island last week: We're not leaving until the job is done. And we'll be there as long as it takes.

I know there's a lot of questions you probably have. I'll take a few, but I have a Cabinet meeting coming up right away.

Yes.

Federal Emergency Management Agency Funding

Q. Mr. President, can you assure Americans that the Federal Government is going to have the emergency funding that they need to get through this hurricane season?

The President. The answer is, if I can't do that, I'm going to point out why. How can we not respond? My God. How can we not respond to these needs?

And so I'm confident, even though there's a lot of talk from some of our friends up on the Hill about the cost, we've got to do it. This is the United States of America.

Yes.

Governor Ronald D. DeSantis of Florida

Q. Mr. President, Governor DeSantis is also running for president. You are running for reelection. Do you sense any politics in your conversations with him about this issue?

The President. No. Believe it or not. I know that sounds strange, especially how—looking at the nature of politics today.

But you know, I was down there when—the last major storm. I spent a lot of time with him, walking from village to—from community to community, making sure he had what he needed to

get it done. I think he trusts my judgment and my desire to help. And I trust him to be able to suggest that he's—this is not about politics. This is about taking care of the people of his State.

The President's Travel Schedule/Hurricane Idalia Preparation Efforts

Q. Mr. President, on the hurricane, is—in your conversations with the Governors, is there anything that you've heard from them that gives you pause—things that you think need to be there that are not quite there yet?

And secondly, are you making any contingency plans on your own schedule—either with this Labor Day with your own personal travels and also for your international travels that are coming up next week that—are you going to need to just reshuffle things?

The President. Well, I may. I just don't know yet.

And first of all, the—each of the Governors seem to be focused. And I think what's changing—particularly the Governors from North, South Carolina, as well as Georgia—is there wasn't an anticipation that it'd be moving up there—up the coast. They were hopeful, and initially, it looked like it was going to go further east and not affect them. So I think they're all in the process of rapidly focusing on what may happen, what may not happen.

And what they're—what I hope the people of those States listen to is the warnings when they come from the—I mean, a lot of it—there's—they may not see 130-mile-an-hour winds coming through, but guess what? You may also be on the shore in a low-lying area and have an 8-foot surge of, you know, wind surge coming from off the ocean.

But they seem—they've all been through it. I—the guy furthest north, Cooper—Governor Cooper is really focused on that. I mean, they all are; I don't mean to pick. But, I mean, he is the least likely to have the most impact occurring on his shores. But it's a lot of low-lying country.

I was joking with him. I mean, my State is—you know, when you have anything like a hurricane in my State in Delaware and—and suburban Maryland—I mean, on the eastern shore of Maryland, we're 3 feet above sea level, man. You know, you worry about what those surges do.

And that's—the same thing is still happening in Florida, because you're talking about the high tide, low tide, adding 3 feet, and so on.

So I found them all to be laser-focused on what their needs were and—and I—ask them, but I think they're reassured that we're going to be there for whatever they need, including search and rescue off the shore with the Coast Guard—and Coast Guard helicopters and the like.

Q. And, Mr. President——

Q. Mr. President——

Electricity Infrastructure/Wildfires

Q. Mr. President, I have a question for you about—we talked a lot about powerlines and the—having stronger poles. I was curious. Some power companies have talked about potentially shutting off power when there are sort of high-wind incidences for vast parts of the country. And I'm wondering if you think this is sort of an appropriate response by power companies or if you think that they should be working to sort of harden their infrastructure more than just ending power when there is a storm?

The President. I think both. Look, I can—it's very expensive to secure these powerlines, both in terms of the actual structure—you know, we look out there and you see these large towers carrying multiple wires, and the wires are, like, that thick. And they're—you know, they're—they're carrying an awful lot of energy. And sometimes those entire towers come down.

I am not expert enough to know when it makes appropriate—it's appropriate to shut down that line. And that's one of the reasons why I think having the technology to have these meters on each of these facilities tells you where the danger is.

So I can picture—I'm getting beyond my expertise here. But——

Q. So you're talking about huge numbers of Americans suddenly not having power because the company——

The President. Well——

Q. ——makes the determination that——

The President. Well, but either way, you know, we also know how many huge number of Americans have died, how many huge number of Americans have—for example, more forest has been burned to the ground since I've become the—in the time I've been doing this than the entire square miles of the State of Maryland. Imagine the entire State of Maryland burning to the ground. That's how much has already burned to the ground.

So I think as we try to harden the capacity to transmit energy, it's not irrational to make a judgement that you may have to, in a certain circumstance, shut off the power. I just don't know enough to know the detail of how to do that—I mean, where that decision is made.

That's why we're starting off—I was talking with Liz Sherwood-Randall, who does—handles this for me, about the need to put these meters along these so we know where the power is going down. You may be able to shut off parts. I just don't know enough to know that.

Federal Response to Wildfires in Maui, Hawaii

Q. Mr. President, are you concerned at all that a potential Government shutdown would impact the recovery efforts? And what is your reaction to House Republicans who say that they're launching a investigation into the Federal response in Maui?

The President. Well, I'm—I welcome a Federal response in Maui. I think that they should go out and talk to every elected official, from the mayors to the Governors to the United States Senators to the Congresspersons. I welcome—and once they go out and see it, then I'm sure they'll provide the money.

Thank you all very much.

Senate Minority Leader A. Mitchell McConnell

Q. Any concerns about Mitch McConnell's health, sir?

The President. By the way, I just heard literally coming out. And Mitch is a friend, as you know—not a joke. We always—I know people don't believe that the case, but we have disagreements politically, but he's a good friend. And so I'm going to try to get in touch with him later this afternoon. I don't know enough to know.

Q. Do you think he's fit to serve——

The President. Thank you.

Q. ——and should run for reelection?

The President. Are you running?

Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas. I am not, sir.

The President. Okay. All right. Thank you.

Q. Thank you.

Q. Thank you, sir.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:44 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Brian P. Kemp of Georgia; Gov. Henry D. McMaster of South Carolina; Gov. Roy A. Cooper III of North Carolina; Sens. Mazie Hirono and Brian E. Schatz; Reps. Edward M. Case and Jill N. Tokuda; Secretary of Energy Jennifer L. Granholm; and Assistant to the President for Homeland Security Elizabeth D. Sherwood-Randall. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on August 31.

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