

**Written Statement of Mr. Charles Lindsey**

**City Manager, City of Marathon, Florida**

**Before the**

**Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation**

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Good morning Chairman Thune, Ranking Member and our Florida Senator Bill Nelson, and Members of the Committee, my name is Charles Lindsey. I am the City Manager for the City of Marathon, Florida. I want to thank all of you for the opportunity to represent the residents of Marathon and speak to you today about the conditions following the 2017 hurricane season. I also wish to thank all Members of Congress for providing the emergency disaster assistance funding needed during some very difficult times.

Marathon is a coastal island municipality of 8,910 residents located in the heart of the Florida Keys. Due to our remote geographical location, smaller population, and restricted growth we, along with all the communities of the FL Keys face numerous challenges protecting our economy and our delicate environment. We have a relatively small population but we all support a \$2.7 Billion tourism-based economy attracting millions of visitors annually. We have vital commercial, charter and recreational fisheries and a responsibility to protect our unique environment which includes the third largest barrier reef system in the world and the flagship Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. To do all of this we rely in large part on a unique, small community bond that exists from Key Largo to Key West. Following a catastrophic event like IRMA, our situation demands it.

In September of 2017 as Hurricane IRMA built to Category 5 strength and headed toward the south Florida coast the "Keys spirit" came alive. With initial projections changing hourly we worked together to develop immediate plans to assist each community and conduct an evacuation that had not been attempted in over a decade. From Miami to Key West, in Irma's final days, an exact impact location was difficult to predict but there was no doubt we would be hit hard.

Our local FL Keys governments worked together and with the tremendous patience of our residents conducted one of the most effective evacuations in Florida Keys history, no doubt saving many lives. We developed adaptive strategies to shelter our Emergency Management and crucial personnel in place and shifted locations as IRMA's projected path dictated. Our Marathon Team did not leave the Keys and along with the Monroe County team shifted locations slightly northeast to Key Largo where the Ocean Reef community provided us shelter. Our Marathon Sherriff with a small volunteer contingent of law enforcement officers remained in Marathon and established order for the few residents who did not heed the mandatory evacuation order.

Immediately following the destruction caused by one hundred mile an hour winds for 12 hours and a dramatic storm surge, our Marathon Fire Rescue Department and city staff responded quickly. Losing communications during the storm we immediately reestablished contact with our law enforcement team and worked throughout the night to clear our airport runway, Marathon's only lifeline to the mainland.

Upon sunrise on the first morning, it was clear our beautiful island had been devastated. Our residents were away from their homes and our economy and environment demanded a "fast" response and

recovery. Immediate emergency action was necessary, essential services needed to be restored for residents to return, and recovery had to begin immediately to mitigate risk to our economy.

We were overwhelmed with incredible support from Senator Nelson, Senator Rubio, and Congressman Curbelo and their respective staffs. Quickly on scene or in direct contact, they made themselves and their staffs available 24/7, assisting in many ways. Governor Scott led from the front. He along with his staff, the City of Miami Beach, Homestead Police Department, Miami Dade Florida Task Force 1 and hundreds of others, provided valuable support, responding to and assisting Marathon and the entire Florida Keys. To all of these FL officials we are indebted.

For the Florida Keys communities who rely on a tourism-based economy, recovery is the key. Locally, we have plans to respond to crises and that planning is being improved every day to prepare for the next event. While we lacked some of the necessary tools, we made up for this after IRMA with sheer willpower and resiliency. Moving forward, we have identified what tools are needed and we are doing our best to prepare requests to access the grant funding provided by Congress. From advanced communication equipment to a hardened Emergency Operations Center that would allow Emergency Personnel to remain safely sheltered in place, we have identified our needs.

Recovery is the most crucial but also the hardest to achieve and Marathon simply cannot do this alone. We know that for our families to be encouraged to remain in the Keys, and to reboot our tourist economy, marked improvement needed to happen continuously. Up until recently, this progress was evident. Unfortunately, our progress has come to a halt without movement in federal reimbursement. This lack of initial reimbursement is putting us at tremendous risk going into the 2018 season and has stopped further recovery operations due to lack of funding.

In Marathon alone, 4,018 homes were impacted, 1,402 severely damaged, and 392 were completely destroyed. Numerous businesses were devastated and our commercial fishing industry got hit at their most vulnerable time. Perhaps most impactful to our economy, IRMA struck only months before the start of our main tourist season.

To date, Marathon has estimated over \$30M in local storm-related costs. This is six times what we had set aside for hurricane response, requiring us to pull from all fund balances and utilizing FY 2018 revenue to stay solvent. In addition, Marathon had no choice but to secure a \$10M line of credit and costs are increasing every day.

We, like other Keys communities, immediately responded to emergencies and crucial life safety needs. Essential services like wastewater were restored in days and our Florida Keys Electric Co-op, with the help of others throughout the country, assessed, cleared, repaired, and replaced 834 miles of distribution/transmission lines and replaced 175 distribution poles throughout the upper and middle Keys. Their efforts miraculously restored power to the crucial 70-foot transmission life line in 12 hours and provided power to many residents in 10 days. In Marathon alone 300,000 yards of land debris were removed in only a few months, and like our cities overall response, was done so with local funding only, completely draining our reserves.

To date, Marathon and the Florida Keys communities have received no federal reimbursement! Within weeks of IRMA we depleted all our funds set aside for hurricane response on the understanding that initial reimbursement would come quickly. We were encouraged as the President acted decisively, enacting a declaration and approving 100% funding for the first 30-days and Congress, not hesitating, providing it. However these funds remain frozen in the middle, somewhere between you and us.

In addition, marine debris removal remains at a crisis level in our canals and nearshore waters. The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) and Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) both did an outstanding job facilitating the removal of thousands of vessels. However, everything else remains -- cars, homes, recreation vehicles (RV's), and construction debris still choke the canals, from the surface to the bottom.

At this time we estimate over 513 canals in Monroe County are negatively impacted with estimated cleanup costs over \$52.6M. Layers of regulations and policy coupled by extreme costs make our waterways and associated debris removal nearly impossible without adequate federal funding or an upfront commitment that costs will be quickly reimbursed. The Keys are in a unique geographic location and all our waters (i.e. private, local, state and federal) affect our National Marine Sanctuary in some manner.

As a small municipality in a very complex system it is impossible to determine with any certainty why the reimbursement process has been so slow. One thing we do know with full certainty is that 7 months post-IRMA we are at risk with minimal disaster reserves and the 2018 hurricane season fast approaching. The forecasters suggest we are facing an active season, already predicting 14 named storms for 2018.

Today, Marathon has over \$28M in project worksheet (PWs) submissions to FEMA and has received \$0 in reimbursement. Locally, the FEMA process appears to be intact. We have FEMA representation reviewing and submitting our claims; we have contracted labor to facilitate the difficult submission process; and the online portal, providing transparency. However, without receiving reimbursement of our Category A and Category B project worksheet submissions our recovery efforts have all but stopped. Furthermore, the longer our canals and waterways remain polluted the environmental risks increase, potentially negating decades of hard work and the hundreds of millions of federal, state, and local dollars spent improving nearshore water quality. Unfortunately, this does not escape the purview of our potential tourists.

When asked what we need to be prepared for the 2018 season -- the answers are simple: To respond and then recover from a Hurricane next year we need the funds that were approved by Congress to make it on the ground as quickly and efficiently as possible. I am not referring to large complex claims to reimburse the design, engineering, and repair of infrastructure such as a bridge or roadway. What I am referring to here is federal funding for marine debris and the reimbursement of Category A and B projects that should come quickly to keep recovery efforts moving and protect us financially going into this next hurricane season. These are the funds we expended within the first 90-days responding to life safety issues, initial debris removal, and forced labor costs.

We need available federal funding to begin removal of our extensive marine debris, including muck and sand. This is polluting, reducing flow, and creating life safety/environmental issues in our local waters. Currently, different rules for different pots of federal funding along with FEMA reimbursement guidelines prohibit common sense solutions to removing this debris from our waters. These regulations make it cost prohibitive and nearly impossible for states and local governments, especially in an environment like ours, to address our debris removal

Currently, one potentially viable solution for Marathon and the entire Florida Keys for debris removal resides within the Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). On behalf of the entire Florida Keys, Monroe County has submitted a Damage Survey Report and application to NRCS and the agency determined the 103 of the 513 canals to be eligible for \$35.4M in reimbursable funds with a \$10.5M local match requirement. NOAA's Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary is

supporting the Monroe County application. Now, we need support for the NRCS to move quickly to award these funds to the County so the local communities can access them.

When asked for overall process improvement recommendations for subsequent years: we need policies and procedures to be streamlined and improved with an eye on real-world scenarios. For example, FEMA's online registration sounds great, but with no internet in a disaster situation, we had to develop local solutions to register residents.

We will need more case managers. Remarkably, within days, FEMA had representation on the ground to assist but it was not close to adequate. More FEMA case management personnel are needed to assist the thousands of displaced residents and help navigate the numerous available programs and track their assistance.

We will need to have predetermined plans in place and lines of pre-approved reimbursable funding clearly defined. Staff from the USCG volunteered to take the lead in removing vessels from our delicate waters and along with FWC, did so with incredibly efficiency. But they did as they always do: they got on scene, they evaluated, and they executed. In the end, this approach works but it does so with added cost and increased risk. Having processes like vessel removal and the responsibilities for it predetermined with clear funding lines established for such reimbursement would allow agencies like the USCG & FWC to increase safety, efficiency and overall effectiveness.

We need better communication processes with clearly defined unified goals for all levels of government across all agencies. This is not just a FEMA issue, it is a national one. Increasing communication allows transparency, it increases effectiveness, and it promotes entire domain awareness.

As we move forward today we are challenged with navigating difficult processes to prepare for the next season while at the same time recover and support our displaced families and struggling businesses from this last event. To FEMA's credit, I believe the agency has accurately captured what is needed in its 2018 Strategic Plan. So, one key question is how do we help them so we are all ready for the next storm event?

I'd like to use FEMA's three strategic goals of "Build a culture of preparedness", "Ready the Nation for Catastrophic Disasters", and "Reduce the Complexity of FEMA" as a framework to help begin to answer the question. The City of Marathon has and is, continuing to develop a culture of preparedness and is doing everything at our level possible to ready ourselves for the 2018 season. We are developing strategies based on best practices and lessons learned and implementing those process improvements to our already developed Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan. We have identified risks and we are doing everything we can to mitigate them. We have identified gaps and are doing everything in our power to fill them, however we cannot do this alone.

To do so, we need help with what Administrator Long clearly lays out in FEMA's 3<sup>rd</sup> goal of reducing complexity. While he is referring to FEMA as a whole, we need all processes to be adaptable and flexible to get the necessary funds back in our reserves and to adjust to the incredibly unique challenges we face in the Florida Keys.

In Marathon, we are proud of our "Keys Spirit" of working together. Following IRMA's destruction, it was more evident throughout the entire Keys than ever before. Today we continue to prepare for the 2018 Hurricane season but our spirit and efforts alone will not get us there. We have done our part with the tools we have been given and the understanding we have of the processes. Marathon and the entire Keys has responded too, and began recovery following the largest storm we've seen in decades.

In closing, we need the federal system to do its part and help expedite the reimbursement of funds already approved by the President and graciously provided by Congress; and for NRCS to award and release funds to enable us to facilitate the removal of marine debris.

It is an honor to provide this testimony and to tell Marathon's story. Chairman Thune, Senator Nelson and all the Members of this Committee -- thank you for this opportunity, and thank you for all of your efforts supporting, advocating, and delivering assistance to our wonderful City, State, and this great Nation.