

Testimony by Spencer Hawkins, CEM, Government Affairs Committee Chair,
International Association of Emergency Managers

To the

Senate Homeland & Governmental Affairs Committee Permanent
Subcommittee on Investigations

On

One Year After Disaster: Experts Weigh in on the Palisades Fire

January 28, 2026

Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Spencer Hawkins. I am the chair of the Government Affairs Committee of the International Association of Emergency Managers, an organization of more than 5,000 emergency management professionals who serve communities of every size across the nation. I am also a local emergency manager serving Macon-Bibb County, Georgia.

Emergency management is built on a long-standing partnership. It is locally managed, state-supported, and federally funded. This system has worked for decades through hurricanes, wildfires, and floods. However, local and state emergency managers are deeply concerned that rapid shifts in federal policy and funding levels could destabilize the system, a change no community, large or small, can absorb overnight.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides the backbone of our national preparedness, response, and recovery efforts. Key areas include training, financial grants, and response, recovery, and mitigation operations, which are essential to our holistic national emergency management posture. For decades, local emergency managers have led disaster response; States support local efforts, and FEMA provides funding and resources. Training ensures that stakeholders who are not emergency managers, including public works, law enforcement, health officials, and many others, can operate together under a unified system.

Emergency preparedness grants provide mission-essential funding for emergency management programs. Programs such as the Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG) are not handouts. They require a dollar-for-dollar non-federal match, meaning local

governments are true partners, investing their own resources alongside the federal government.

In times of crisis, FEMA's response elements are indispensable. From coordinating Incident Management Assistance Teams (IMATs) and Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) to supporting the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), FEMA ensures that states can help one another when local resources are overwhelmed. FEMA also manages the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS), a mission that depends on a voluntary partnership with private providers, making FEMA's coordinating role essential to life safety.

The recovery phase is where the federal role is most visible. During Hurricane Helene, local governments in the Southeast did everything they could, but no city or county could bear the billions of dollars in damage alone. FEMA's assistance through the Individual Assistance (IA) and Public Assistance (PA) processes was not just helpful; it was the only path to debris removal, temporary housing, and the stabilization of local economies. However, as an example of the current unstable recovery environment, communities devastated by Hurricane Helene are still waiting for FEMA recovery funds. Typically, these dollars would already be in place to facilitate their rebuilding process.

To break the cycle of disaster, we rely on funding for mitigation and risk reduction. This includes major infrastructure projects and small but critical efforts, such as vegetation management, to reduce wildfire risk.

Despite these successes and decades of experience working with FEMA, emergency managers across the nation feel the ground shifting beneath them with little warning.

Emergency managers rely on fiscal and policy predictability. Uncertainty makes it harder to plan budgets, hire staff, and prepare residents for the next "worst-day" scenario. This is not an ideological or partisan issue. A shift in federal disaster support affects residents of California and West Virginia equally. Disasters do not discriminate by state or political affiliation, and neither do we.

IAEM urges Congress to safeguard FEMA's core capabilities and ensure that any reforms to the federal role are developed in partnership with emergency managers, particularly local emergency managers, and professional organizations like IAEM, and that they are included in a collaborative process to shape the future of FEMA and emergency management funding, with phased timelines and meaningful consideration of the reforms. Communities cannot turn on a dime, but with clear communication and sustained partnership, we can meet the challenges ahead.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.