

Presentation Before The
House Environmental Resources Committee

August 26, 1997
Doylestown, PA

Mr. Chairman and members of the House Environmental Resources Committee, my name is John Comey and I'm the executive assistant to PEMA Director Charles Wynne. With me today is Karen Critchfield, director of PEMA's recovery and mitigation bureau. We have been asked by your staff to provide some background on the commonwealth's disaster preparedness and response capabilities. In particular we will focus on the events that developed during 1996. This was a record year for natural disasters in Pennsylvania and the nation. In all, six presidentially declared disasters claimed 112 lives, and caused more than a billion dollars in damage and loss to Pennsylvania homeowners, businesses and local governments. Thousands were displaced from their homes.

In 1996, 63 of the 67 counties in the commonwealth experienced at least one federally declared major disaster. Thirty-six were declared for two disasters. And Adams, Armstrong, Bedford, Blair, Bucks, Cambria, Clearfield, Greene, Huntingdon, Juniata, Mifflin, Perry and Tioga counties were hit by three presidentially declared disasters within this 12 month period. Only Butler, Erie, Lawrence, and Mercer counties were not the site of a declared major disaster in 1996.

More than 2,000 Pennsylvania communities suffered under at least two federally declared disasters. Over 70,000 residents and businesses registered for federal aid. The number of damage survey reports completed to restore essential community infrastructure services has topped 20,000. And more than \$335 million in state and federal disaster aid has been obligated statewide to help residents, businesses and local governments recovery from the repeated flooding and the severe winter storms of January.

Our national disaster assistance program includes three broad categories: Individual Assistance which provides help to homeowners, tenants, and businesses; Public Assistance which assists state, county and community government to restore essential services and facilities; and lastly, Hazard Mitigation, the newest of the groups, which provides limited federal funding to help break the cycle of disasters. One or more of the three programs may be authorized, based on conditions that result from the disaster. The decision on the level and type of assistance authorized rests with the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

To narrow the focus a bit for this discussion, Bucks County was impacted by three major federally declared disasters in 1996. First the January 7th severe winter storm, followed by the January 19 flooding. Only public assistance was approved for the winter storm relief and Bucks County received just under \$1 million in federal and state aid to help offset the cost of opening snow bound communities. Individual and Public Assistance was approved for the January 19

flooding. More than \$2 million in state and federal grants and loans were provided to affected Bucks County residents and businesses. Just under \$500,000 in aid was provided to repair damage to public property.

Then on June 12 another severe storm hit with little warning. This time the impact was limited to Bucks County. Gov. Tom Ridge asked the president to provide federal aid for victims in more than a dozen communities.

In his letter, the governor told the president that intense thunderstorms dumped up to nine inches of rain in Bucks County, triggering severe flooding that caused extensive damage in at least seven communities estimated to exceed \$12 million. According to the National Weather Service, the volume of rain that fell Wednesday night represents approximately 20 percent of the region's total average annual rainfall. The intense thunderstorms triggered extensive flash flooding that damaged nearly 400 homes and businesses, washed out many roads and bridges, disrupted power to more than 100,000 homes and claimed two lives. FEMA approved aid to affected homeowners almost immediately. Just under \$10 million in federal and state grants and loans were awarded to help repair damaged property and replace lost possessions.

Based on a more detailed assessment of damage to public property, PEMA could not recommend that the governor request federal aid for public assistance. The reason being that FEMA uses, among other means, a mathematical formula to measure the magnitude and severity of a disaster within an affected county. The amount used throughout 1996 was \$2.50 per county capita. The actual per capita damage to public property in Buck County was less than one dollar. We knew that FEMA would not approve this request and we chose not to raise public expectation of help by submitting a request that would be denied.

The state did provide immediate aid to address a problem in Yardley Borough where a stream washed out much of a parking area at a community gas station. Local officials were concerned that the underground gasoline storage tanks might be affected. PEMA with the Department of Environmental Protection awarded an emergency contract that weekend for \$100,000 to correct this situation.

Mr. Chairman, I trust this information is helpful in developing a better understanding of the options available to the commonwealth and its communities in response to disasters. Rather than my trying to second guess areas of interest, I'll attempt to answer your questions regarding our disaster preparedness and recovery programs.