

Testimony of Stephanie Bowman, Commissioner, Port of Seattle
US Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Seattle Field Hearing
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Introduction

Good morning Senator Cantwell and Secretary Moniz. I am Stephanie Bowman, Commissioner of the Port of Seattle. Thank you for the privilege of being here with you today.

The Port of Seattle owns and operates facilities that play a critical role in facilitating the nation's trade. Our marine cargo facilities, under the management of the Northwest Seaport Alliance, are the fourth largest container load center in the US, with more than half of our import volumes bound for the Midwest distribution centers. The imported cargo coming through our port literally supplies goods to businesses and homes throughout the country.

On the aviation side, Seattle-Tacoma International Airport is the nation's 13th busiest passenger airport, serving over 42 million passengers in 2015. Sea-Tac is currently the fastest growing large hub airport in the country, experiencing double-digit growth for three consecutive years. We are the region's gateway to Asia, providing a critical link for our international businesses such as Boeing, Microsoft and Amazon. Additionally, Sea-Tac also is the primary air cargo gateway for the Pacific Northwest, facilitating the export of high value, time sensitive Washington State agricultural products to Asia, such as our world-renowned cherries.

Port of Seattle facilities also serve as a lifeline to residents of Alaska and Hawaii, and any disruption in port operations due to a natural disaster would have serious consequences for these states. Alaska is especially dependent on our infrastructure. Of all waterborne containerized traffic between Alaska and the lower 48 states, over 80% moves through our terminals, including food, medical supplies, building materials and other necessities.

Given the critical role that the Port of Seattle plays in our region's and nation's economy, ensuring our facilities are resilient in the case of a disaster is a charge my colleagues and I take very seriously. We rely on assistance from the federal government to help support our preparedness efforts, and I am grateful for the attention you are giving to this issue.

Airports and seaports are critical infrastructure

We all should be concerned about the resiliency of the infrastructure at our nation's gateway ports. Port infrastructure will be essential to the regional response in the event of an emergency. Sea-Tac Airport is anticipated to be a hub for relief efforts, and maritime facilities also will support the response and recovery mission assuming they remain able to operate. Disruption of flight operations at Sea-Tac Airport would send ripple effects throughout the country's air transportation system, given our airport's role as a hub for both national and international flights, particularly our connection to Asia. Most importantly, it could cripple our collective ability to respond to a disaster.

Port of Seattle's emergency planning

While there is no question we can always continue to improve, the Port of Seattle and our partners at the Port of Tacoma are maritime industry leaders in emergency preparedness. We utilize an all-hazards approach to plan for and respond to the various impacts that could result from any number of different emergency scenarios. Our methods are based on nationally recognized best practices, such as the National Incident Management System, Incident Command System and the National Response Framework. Consistent application of these best practices is reinforced throughout our systematic training and exercise program that validates that we have the right organizational infrastructure, equipment and systems in place to meet our responsibilities to the region.

In the case of earthquakes, our contingency planning is based on the risks associated with strong to major quakes. Seaport facilities are at greater risk than the airport because they are built on liquefaction zones and are susceptible to the seiche effects of a tsunami. Even if our marine terminals are able to continue operations, it is likely road and rail access to the waterfront would be obstructed. Given the strain that will be placed on first responders in a disaster, we expect we will need to be self-sufficient with our emergency response at seaport facilities for at least 14 days. Sea-Tac Airport does not face these same risks and is expected to withstand a strong to major quake fairly well. The airport likely would be capable of handling moderate to full disaster relief flight operations within 24 to 72 hours. Restoring the airport's operational capability to this level was emphasized by federal and military entities in the recent Cascadia Rising exercise.

I am confident we are taking the right steps toward achieving resiliency and that we have a strong foundation for mounting an effective recovery effort. However, it is important to note that depending on the magnitude of the quake, restoring normal operations could take anywhere from days to years.

Our first priority in the event of an earthquake and other disasters is the protection of human life, including the safety of employees, tenants, and customers. Simultaneously we would establish communications with Unified Command and other responding agencies and stakeholders. Next on the list is damage assessments, infrastructure stabilization and risk assessment for what could happen in subsequent aftershocks, with the primary goal being to resume operations to support relief efforts. We also would confirm the sustainability of response operations by obtaining food, water, and shelter.

By far the most important factor in successfully responding to an earthquake is effective coordination between the dozens of entities that will be involved, and this is a core of our emergency planning. That is why exercises such as Cascadia Rising are vital to enhancing regional resilience. Cascadia Rising allowed us to test our internal communication backup systems and multi-jurisdictional coordination across the port, city, county, and federal levels.

Another benefit of Cascadia Rising was that it highlighted opportunities for improvement. We have already started taking steps to address these issues. But one thing that is clear is that we are not going to be able to operate resilient airports and seaports without a strong partnership with the federal government.

In addition to the critical role it will play in responding to a disaster, we also depend on the federal government to help fund our own individual and regional preparedness efforts. We ask that federal funding levels for these programs be maintained and that funding be made available directly to the jurisdictions that manage and maintain critical transportation infrastructure, including ports.

While there are a few federal grant programs that focus on preparedness, the Port Security Grant Program is the main source of federal funding for ports for all-hazards investments. The PSGP can be used for emergency preparedness to a limited extent, but its true purpose is reducing the risk of terrorism and criminal activity. Many types of projects necessary to support a comprehensive preparedness effort are ineligible for the program. For example, funds cannot be used to develop training or for firefighting equipment, let alone for other critical, expensive projects such as seismic retrofitting. The PGSP could be amended to allow for more resilience applications, although funding would need to be increased in order to avoid undermining port security priorities.

Even better, I ask the federal government to consider creating a critical infrastructure resiliency grant program and a national strategy to help guide funding decisions.

Personal experience at Mosier

I would like to shift gears for a moment and mention briefly a personal experience that has helped shape my perspective on emergency preparedness. I have a home in the small town of Mosier, Oregon, and was one of the first on the scene when 16 rail cars carrying crude oil from North Dakota derailed on June 3rd, with four of those rail cars catching fire. Witnessing the response to this disaster, and knowing first-hand how catastrophic it could have been, has greatly influenced my thoughts on first response efforts. While I realize this isn't a primary focus of this hearing, I'm happy to answer any questions you have about this experience.

Even though this was a relatively small event compared to some of the scenarios we have discussed today, I would characterize it as significant. It has solidified my commitment to the principle of resiliency, and I believe emergency preparedness needs to be a priority for all jurisdictions, large and small.

Closing

In closing, at the Port of Seattle we recognize the decisions we make have implications for the national and regional economy and that our infrastructure has a unique role to play during a crisis. The Port of Seattle stands ready to strengthen our partnership with the federal government, including the Department of Energy, on ensuring we are doing everything we can to safeguard our critical infrastructure and to protect our communities.

Thank you for inviting me to participate today. I look forward to your questions.