**Country Declaration on behalf of USA**

**to the II Session of the**

**Regional Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in the Americas**

Mr. Chairman, Fellow Delegates,

On behalf of the U.S. Government, I want to thank the United Nations and the Government of Mexico for hosting this Second Session of the Regional Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in the Americas. I am pleased and honored to represent the U.S. at this important conference and to join everyone here in contributing to this worthy cause.

Under the leadership of the Obama Administration, the U.S. remains committed to strengthening its role in disaster risk reduction. We realize that achieving our common goal – reducing the loss of life and property in our communities – depends upon successful implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action. As a nation, the U.S. continues to employ the principles of the Hyogo Framework in its domestic policies and practices, but rising to the global disaster-resilience challenge will take the collective action of government at *all* levels, non-profit organizations, the private sector and above all individuals trying to do what is best for themselves, their families and their communities.

For this reason, we would like to thank the participation of some of our regional partners – Mexico and Canada - in the recent North American Regional Workshop on the HFA Mid-Term Review held in Arlington Virginia in November 2010. It served as an opportunity to share our expertise and to learn from our regional partners who are confronted with risks similar to our own. The frank discussions gave clarity to the progress and challenges we will discuss at the upcoming ISDR Global Platform meeting in Geneva in a very few months.

The thematic focus of this Regional Platform resonates with the United States as we continue to rebuild from Hurricanes Katrina and Ike and the BP oil-well blowout in the Gulf, which devastated many of our Gulf Coast communities and disproportionately affected the poor. More recently, the major earthquakes in Haiti, Chile, and now Japan have solemnly reminded us of the continued vulnerability of communities exposed to the forces of nature. Collectively, such disasters challenge all nations to strengthen the resilience of their communities in the face of extreme meteorological, hydrological, and geological events. A frank comparison of these horrible disasters will allow us to recover lessons learned to build a future more resilient against this terrible loss of human life.

From the U.S. perspective our framework in DRR parallels and has drawn inspiration from the Hyogo Framework. Our national platform is a governmental one and has needed to find creative ways to reach out and to achieve a kind of multi-sectoral approach including partnerships with the US National Academies Disasters Roundtable. Our national platform is composed by the U.S. National Science and Technology Council Subcommittee for Disaster Reduction (SDR), which brings together a group of agencies – not just science agencies or engineering agencies but also many of the key implementing agencies for disaster risk reduction. Such a combination both on the science and engineering side and on the implementation side is crucial in order to be able to see the results. In our monthly meetings we discuss the progress of the multi-sectoral effort across the US government agencies.

Our own efforts to build a framework very much parallel that of the Hyogo Framework. It is called the *Grand Challenges for Disaster Reduction* and as with the HFA it is a ten year strategy for promoting and applying science and engineering for more resilient communities. The Grand Challenges and the Hyogo Framework share many similarities. The goals shared with the two programs are:

• The relevant hazards are recognized and understood

• The communities at risk know when a hazard even is imminent

• Property losses and lives at risk in future natural hazard events are minimized

• Disaster-resilient communities experience minimum disruption to life and economy after a hazard event has passed

The first Grand Challenge is providing disaster information where and when it is needed. Providing disaster information is much more than the response to a disaster. It is what needs to be done beforehand in order to limit the losses. Using tsunamis as an example, the U.S. has put a great deal of effort, particularly the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, into building an end-to-end system. Along with a warning system with buoys and seismic stations we must have the ability to reach people who are in harm’s way. This is a multi-sectoral task, inherently moving across the government sectors. With such a system we were able to warn the communities on the west coast to the possibility of a tsunami from the Japan earthquake. At the same time, it is necessary to provide preparedness education, the understanding of what to do when disaster occurs, and a census of what been done to prepare communities to know where evacuation pathways must be.

The second Grand Challenge is the understanding of the natural processes that we face. One of the key questions that workshop participants will be addressing is how risk is going to shift in the context of climate change. As we look at hazards and the vulnerabilities, we need to understand how those processes are going to be affected in a warming world. This linkage has been underscored and emphasized by the President’s Science Advisor, Dr. John Holdren. As we move forward in climate adaptation, we need to take advantage of the efforts that are already underway in the disaster risk reduction community to support the decision making that is going to be taking place.

The third Grand Challenge is to develop mitigation strategies and technologies. There are opportunities for structural mitigation and as well as limitations to such strategies. The stunning contrast in impacts of the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile truly underscore the importance of building codes. Understanding whether we have the right incentives in place is quite important. Often we lack the right incentives needed to encourage mitigation. So while mitigation is a key to success, the difficulty of implementing mitigation measures is also a true barrier to it.

The fourth Grand Challenge is to identify and reduce vulnerability to independent critical infrastructure. To cite a positive example, the Trans-Alaska Pipeline was built in anticipation of large earthquakes and was able to withstand in 2002 a magnitude 7.9 earthquake that shifted the pipeline twenty feet but did not result in an environmental disaster. While this is a positive example, we are aware that for so many hazards and so many situations, critical infrastructure is going to be one of the determining factors in how quickly communities are able to recover following an event, and there is much we still need to do in this arena. In the recent High—Level meeting on Disaster Risk Reduction held in Kathmandu last month it was clearly shown that a simple census of the survivability of hospitals, schools, and major nodes of transportation such as bridges and causeways is one of the first steps in developing a country-wide program in DRR.

The fifth Grand Challenge is developing standardized methods through which communities can look at their vulnerabilities and understand what it is that they face. Whereas this has been done for individual hazards to get at assessments, one of the challenges that we recognize moving forward is that we need to find tools by which communities can look at the full spectrum of what it is that they face.

Finally, the last of these Grand Challenges which links directly to the Hyogo Framework, is promoting risk-wise behavior. This is the challenge upon which all else rests. We know that the impacts of disasters are rising. We have additional vulnerability, not necessarily due to increases in the hazards, but in how we operate in society. So the challenge is ultimately convincing the individual that they have to take on this challenge. For example, earthquakes typically do not occur on an annual or decadal basis or maybe even on a century basis, so the challenge becomes how one makes the hazard real enough to promote that risk-wise behavior. California undertook what is the largest public preparedness exercise in U.S. history. First it was done in Southern California and now it’s an annual statewide exercise in which 7 million people this year. And not just the response drill to an earthquake – in this case a large earthquake on the San Andreas Fault – but really emphasizing preparedness, what you can do before the event. It has elements similar to Canada’s 72 Hour Campaign.

As a follow-on to the development of the Grand Challenges for Disaster Reduction, we (SDR) released a series of 14 hazard-specific implementation plans in February 2008, and a fifteenth plan in 2010, identifying priority actions for science and technology to meet these challenges. Each implementation plan identifies the following characteristics of disaster-resilient communities. A nation where relevant hazards are recognized and understood, where communities at risk know when a hazard event is imminent, where individuals can live safely in the context of our planet's extreme events, and where disaster-resilient communities experience minimum disruption to life and economy after a hazard event has passed.

A significant degree of the responsibility for disaster risk reduction in the United States rests at the state and local level. For example, a key component of disaster risk reduction is building codes, which are adopted and implemented at the state and local level. These building codes, which address a number of different hazards, are based on model building codes that are developed through a consensus process by non-governmental organizations such as the American Society of Civil Engineers and International Code Council. These model building codes incorporate current scientific and engineering understanding across multiple hazards, including seismic shaking intensity, wind loads, and fire characteristics, among others.

The United States has invested in the development of loss-estimation capabilities such as the Hazards US – Multi-Hazard (HAZUS-MH) software package developed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. This software incorporates the current understanding of hazard with inventories of structures and other data to estimate losses. The Federal government has made substantial investments in assessments for multiple hazards. In order to make hazards more real to decision-makers and the public, scenarios for specific high-impact natural hazard events have been developed for a number of cities. Considerable investment is required to fully implement risk assessment capabilities on a national basis.

The United States has deployed early warning systems for a number of hazards, including extreme weather events, floods, and tsunamis. A prototype debris-flow warning system has been deployed for wildfire impacted areas of southern California. Early-warning capabilities exist for some well-monitored volcanoes, and plans have been made to implement a National Volcano Early Warning System. The US does not currently have an early warning system for earthquakes; such a capability has been identified as an outcome of full implementation of the partially deployed Advanced National Seismic System.

The United States recognizes the need to learn from disasters and has made substantial investments in post-event reviews and information gathering both for events at home and abroad. One of the Grand Challenges for Disaster Reduction identified by the National Science and Technology Council's Subcommittee for Disaster Reduction (SDR) is to assess disaster resilience. Federal agencies must work with universities, local governments, and the private sector to identify effective standards and metrics for assessing disaster resilience.

With consistent factors and regularly-updated metrics, it will be possible to maintain community “report cards” that accurately assess the community’s level of disaster resilience. This in turn will support comparability between communities and provide a context for action to further reduce vulnerability. Validated models, standards and metrics are needed for estimating cumulative losses, projecting the impact of changes in technology and policies, and monitoring the overall estimated economic loss avoidance of planned actions.

Working with State and local emergency managers and other government officials, the Department of Homeland Security is making substantial investments in disaster response exercises that test plans that have been developed. In addition, individual communities are undertaking public preparedness exercises such as the Great

California Shakeout, which has become an annual drill involving nearly 7 million people in 2009, many of them schoolchildren, in activities to prepare for a major earthquake on the Southern San Andreas Fault.