

PREPARED REMARKS OF
GOVERNOR HALEY BARBOUR, STATE OF MISSISSIPPI

February 2, 2006

Madam Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to join you today to discuss the worst natural disaster in our nation's history, Hurricane Katrina.

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck our state a grievous blow. Although the eye of the storm landed at the Mississippi-Louisiana line, that eye was more than thirty miles wide, and Katrina completely devastated our entire coastline, from Pearlinton to Pascagoula. The miles upon miles of utter destruction is unimaginable, except to those like many of you who have witnessed it with your own eyes, on the ground. But this hurricane wasn't just a calamity for the Mississippi Gulf Coast; its impact extended far inland with hurricane force more than 200 miles from the Coast.

In her wake, Katrina left literally tens of thousands of uninhabitable, often obliterated homes; thousands of small businesses in shambles; dozens of

schools and public buildings ruined and unusable; highways, ports and railroads, water and sewer systems, all destroyed.

On behalf of the people of Mississippi, I thank our sister states for all their assistance. The State of Florida's elite search and rescue team was on the ground the first night, joining our local and state people, saving lives. For weeks, there were 600 Florida law enforcement officers, helping protect lives and property on the Coast, and providing indispensable support for local law enforcement.

Essential help provided by other states is a testament to the effectiveness of the Emergency Management Assistance Compact among the states. North Carolina's Med-One portable hospital; Georgia's investigators and Ohio's search and rescue teams; 12,000 National Guard from units of nearly 20 states had boots on the ground. Alabama sent two MP units while Mobile was still flooded. As Governor, I'm personally moved by it all.

The outpouring of support and generosity from the American people has been overwhelming. The private sector, corporate America, philanthropists and everyday people have done so much. A few weeks after the storm, the President and I toured a faith-based feeding station where hundreds of displaced people were eating a hot meal. I met a fellow from Vermont, a

truck driver. He and 16 other truck drivers had driven down from Vermont to deliver 17 trailers of food to Gulfport. I couldn't believe it . . . 17 tractor-trailers all the way from Vermont. Then, he told me it was his third trip. The church and faith based groups have been terrific, really the backbone of on-going relief efforts. They are still there, helping our people.

We also appreciate the efforts of the federal government. People complain about failures, and there were plenty of problems; but let me tell you about federal efforts that didn't go wrong. The night Katrina struck, Coast Guard helicopter crews from Mobile conducted search and rescue operations on the Coast. These fearless young men, who hung from helicopters on ropes, dangling through the air in the dark that first night, pulled people off of roofs and out of trees. By the first Friday these Coast Guard daredevils had lifted 1700 Mississippians to safety by hoisting them into helicopters. Later that week, the U.S. Department of Transportation began providing fuel for all our emergency responders and critical operations, which was essential in our recovery efforts.

During the relief and recovery stages the federal government has pumped resources in to help us. These efforts have been enormous, but those efforts haven't been perfect, far from it. From the outset there were problems and shortages. Some were the inevitable result of our state's bearing the brunt of the largest and worst natural disaster in American history, which obliterated

all systems: electricity, water, sewer, roads, bridges, and communications. FEMA's logistical operations simply didn't provide what was needed.

We found ourselves having to scramble, adjust, innovate, make do. Our efforts weren't perfect either, not by any means. But the spirit of our people pulled us through. Our people are strong, resilient, self-reliant. They're not whiners; they're not into victim hood. From day one they hitched up their britches and did what had to be done: they helped themselves and helped their neighbors. Their spirit has been an inspiration to me, and it was and is the key to relief, recovery, rebuilding and renewal.

Just before Christmas Congress passed a major Katrina supplemental disaster assistance package, totaling \$29 billion. Added to the assistance that will result from the Stafford Act, the federal government is providing some \$25-27 billion of support for Mississippians and rebuilding the infrastructure of our state. We are very grateful, and I pledge to you and your constituents that we will be good stewards of those resources.

I especially want to thank Senator Thad Cochran, who led the passage of the package of supplemental Katrina recovery appropriations; and Senator Trent Lott, who led passage of the Gulf Opportunity Zone bill; and to our entire Congressional delegation.

I'll be glad to answer questions about how we are implementing this unprecedented package of support, but I believe you want me to focus my testimony on shorter term issues, such as early stage relief and recovery activities.

Katrina's gigantic storm surge destroyed or made uninhabitable about 70,000 housing units. Less than two weeks after the storm I told the public that temporary housing would be the biggest problem we'd face over the next few months, and that has proved correct.

The first recommendation I make to you, FEMA and others seeking to learn the lessons from this catastrophe is the temporary housing solution of installing travel trailers is insufficient for disasters of this magnitude.

FEMA and its contractor Bechtel have installed more than 34,000 travel trailers and mobile homes that serve as temporary housing for about 100,000 Mississippians. Even with the fastest pace of delivery and installation ever, and that has been the case in Mississippi over the last five months, not enough people can get temporary housing fast enough with this single solution.

Not only does the math not work, the travel trailer is not designed or built to be lived in for long. We have a hurricane season that will officially begin June 1, and there will still be 25 or 30,000 travel trailers in the coastal area of the state. It won't take a Katrina to blow or wash travel trailers away.

FEMA should quickly develop alternatives to this one solution for temporary housing. Modular or other non-stick-built design transitional housing exists that can be built faster than a contractor can move in 35,000 travel trailers, and the structures are not only stronger and safer, they also live better. Temporary group living quarters such as are used in the Olympics or by the military would be an appropriate alternative for some and can be erected in a fraction of the time.

These are existing alternatives, and more can and should be developed. The current near-sole reliance on travel trailers is inadequate for meeting a huge need such as Katrina created.

In the long term a sufficient supply of affordable housing will be the hardest requirement for us to meet because of the sheer numbers needed, but we'll get it done.

I do suggest that the idea of “all risks” insurance be considered. The federal government has made tremendous resources available to Mississippi to help our homeowners rebuild. This need was caused by the fact that many Mississippians who lived outside the federally delineated flood zone did not carry flood insurance, believing they did not need it. Because regular homeowners insurance doesn’t cover floods, these people did not know they were exposed with no insurance coverage. My state insurance commissioner has suggested it is time to look at insurance companies making “all risk” insurance available to all customers.

Our strategy from the beginning was to get our people home, rebuilding their communities. Temporary housing was the toughest nut to crack, but we had much quicker success in achieving the second pre-requisite for families to return. We got our schools back open quickly.

By October 10, six weeks after landfall, 151 of our 152 school districts were operating, and almost 98% of our students were back in school in Mississippi. The last district, Bay St. Louis – Waveland, opened on November 6. It would have opened two weeks earlier except the delivery of its mobile classrooms was delayed. State School Superintendent Hank Bounds and the local administrators and teachers did a super job, and one that is essential to getting families back to rebuild their communities.

Today almost all of Mississippi's K-12 public school students are back in school in the district in which they were enrolled before Katrina. They may be in temporary quarters, but even on the Coast, 90% are in school on the Coast.

The last requirement to get folks home is work. Our biggest employers, such as Northrup Grumman, Chevron, NASA's Stennis Space Center, DuPont, etc., are fully operational. Some, such as Oreck's vacuum cleaner plant at devastated Long Beach, opened the week after the storm. Others had employees working weeks or months to clean up, rebuild and restart. Only three of the Coast's twelve casinos have reopened, but we expect all will do so, mostly this year.

In fact, today there is a labor shortage on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Clean up such as debris removal, repair and rebuilding are labor intensive, and even with a major influx of non-local labor, a lot of jobs go unfilled.

Nevertheless, those Mississippians who evacuated are back in their communities or home areas, though tens of thousands are not back in their homes, which either don't exist or still are not habitable.

We've made enormous progress and make more everyday. But we have a mighty tall mountain in front of us. Let me use debris removal as an example.

In Mississippi alone Katrina left in its wake nearly 45 million cubic yards of debris – from barges and ocean going containers to the remnants of what had been 70,000 homes. The largest amount of debris from a previous hurricane was barely more than half as much. That was from Andrew in Florida, and it took more than a year to clean it up and dispose of it.

In less than five months more than 30 million cubic yards of Katrina's debris in Mississippi has been cleared. That is two or three times the clean up rate of the next biggest storm; the problem is, we still have twelve or thirteen million cubic yards to go. While we're over 70% complete statewide, in Hancock County, where the storm came in, debris removal is not quite half finished.

If I may, I suggest you and the Administration consider some ways to improve the debris removal program. Using local contractors is a big plus, but the current system doesn't encourage that. While local contractors have proven faster in our case, the system actually discourages local governments from hiring them. It does this by creating financial risk for the community. If the Corps' contractor fails to keep proper records and has reimbursements denied or de-obligated, the Corps absolves the local government of financial

responsibility. Same if a Corps' contractor fails to complete a job or does it wrong; the Corps takes responsibility.

Local governments should be given training and support to help protect themselves from these risks before any disaster strikes. We learned the hard way. Ultimately we assigned state audit staff and contracted with a CPA firm to help our local governments protect themselves on issues like this. The risk of significant de-obligations by the federal government is scary to small local government.

Another suggestion arises out of a problem that stemmed from one our successes.

Mississippi adopted the unified command structure, and working with our federal partners, we maintained continuity of government throughout the disaster and its aftermath.

Our State Emergency Operations Center was replicated in each county by a county EOC. But we didn't do a good enough job of integrating our municipal governments in the command structure. City officials were not as plugged in to the county EOC. Ultimately, we assigned a person to each mayor, to at least try to help them get their questions answered. In the wake of a big emergency, it is surprisingly hard to get an answer . . . especially

one that will stick. My point is the structure of government must be taken into consideration in setting up the unified command, and local leaders need help getting answers.

Another debris removal issue stymied us for a couple of weeks early in the clean up. It's called right of entry onto private property to clean up debris that is a health and/or safety hazard.

We had large areas that were obliterated, and the landowners evacuated for a period of time. Health and safety concerns demanded the government (local or Corps) remove and dispose of the debris in a timely basis, but there were two problems: owners couldn't be found in order to get a right of entry consent form signed, and FEMA required each parcel of private property be inspected to ascertain that a health or safety risk existed. We got hung up in this for a couple of weeks, mostly over the wording on a form.

In big emergencies snags like this must be cut through quickly.

Our last recommendation that I hope is obvious to everyone: The need for sustainable, interoperable communications is paramount. Areas like South Mississippi need such a communications system for its first responders, local officials and state officials, whether elected officials or state law enforcement, National Guard, etc. Inability to communicate blinds even the

strongest leaders and most dedicated first responders. It hamstring everyone from FEMA to the local constable. Congress should make establishment of a sustainable, interoperable communication system its first priority in providing resources for futures calamities.

Thank you.