



United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman, ID-Conn.

Opening Statement of Chairman Joseph Lieberman
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Hearing
“Implementing FEMA Reform: Are We Prepared for the 2007 Hurricane Season?” Washington, DC
May 22, 2007

Good afternoon and thank you all for being here.

Today, with hurricane season about to start, we will examine the Department of Homeland Security’s progress in implementing legislation this Committee passed last year to strengthen FEMA and make it the leading force in our nation’s emergency preparedness and response system.

Just this morning, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicted this hurricane season, which is just 10 days away, will be an active one, with 13 to 17 named storms, with as many as 10 becoming hurricanes.

We’ve already had our first named storm – Subtropical Storm Andrea, which formed on May 9th.

And, of course, beyond responding to natural disasters, we know we must also be prepared to respond to a catastrophic terrorist attack.

I want to welcome our witnesses: FEMA Administrator David Paulison, and Deputy Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security Michael Jackson.

I want to thank you both for your service to our country in two of the most demanding jobs anywhere. Your successes are too often taken for granted and not noticed. But your failures, real or perceived, are broadcast live for all to see. That is tough assignment and I want you and all of the employees at the Department to know that we appreciate your hard work on behalf of the American people.

When Katrina hit New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in August 2005 – causing the deaths of over 1,500 people, destroying billions of dollars in property and uprooting millions of lives – we watched live on television as a region drowned and our emergency response systems foundered.

It was the Department’s first major challenge since it was formed in response to the attacks of 9-11. And while the Coast Guard – a proud division of DHS – performed valiantly, rescuing thousands of people stranded on rooftops, the overall response was chaotic and uncoordinated.

Following the Katrina debacle, this Committee spent eight months investigating what had gone wrong. We concluded that there were failures of government at all levels. We also found that FEMA had never been designed to cope with a catastrophic disaster like Katrina.

The Committee report that followed our investigation contained many recommendations that were adopted last year in the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006, which Senator Collins and I coauthored.

First and foremost, the new law was designed to ensure that a newly strengthened FEMA is the hub of DHS’ efforts to prepare for and respond to disasters of all kinds – including catastrophic events like Katrina.

That means that FEMA must be more forward leaning, efficient and proactive. It must be prepared to marshal resources from across the federal government, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations – and even sometimes from our allies abroad – and move quickly when state and local governments are overwhelmed.

And DHS must be prepared to fully support those efforts.

Our legislation reunited preparedness and response within FEMA so that the officials who have to lead our nation’s response are also responsible for leading our efforts to prepare.

The new law also makes the Administrator of FEMA the principal advisor to the President for emergency management and requires FEMA's senior leadership have the emergency management qualifications necessary for their jobs.

While some still call for FEMA to be taken out of DHS, I believe that would be a serious mistake. And I personally will do anything I can to stop such a step backward.

Our legislation strengthens FEMA by making it a distinct entity within DHS, similar to the Coast Guard and Secret Service, while bolstering FEMA's ability to tap into the many other assets within DHS – this would be lost if we separated FEMA from DHS.

So with today's hearing – and as part of our ongoing oversight of DHS and FEMA – we want to explore what DHS and FEMA have done to improve disaster preparedness and response and what challenges remain.

Americans need to hear we are making progress because Hurricane Katrina didn't just devastate New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. It also dealt a body blow to our national sense of safety as well.

Today, almost two years later, we are clearly better off. FEMA has made changes that we will hear more about today.

But FEMA continues to face post-Katrina challenges, including helping tens of thousands of Americans still living in trailers get back on their feet and bringing aid to communities across the Gulf Coast still struggling to rebuild, while simultaneously preparing for the next storm that may strike.

Obviously, building FEMA into the premier federal emergency response agency our nation needs will not happen overnight.

The challenges are great but we need to face them squarely, so I appreciate the willingness of today's witnesses to step up to the plate, and I look forward to your testimony.

Senator Collins.