

Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco
Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs
February 2, 2006

Madam Chair, Senator Lieberman, and distinguished members of the Committee, it is an honor to be here.

I deeply appreciate your bipartisan review, and your efforts to identify the lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina. I take full responsibility for improving Louisiana's emergency response, just as Congress is responsible for improving the federal response. We stand united in our determination to do better.

I thank the American people for uplifting us with your prayers and generosity. I thank the governors and officials from every state and territory for sending tens of thousands of National Guard troops and first responders. Men and women from across the country stood shoulder to shoulder with Louisiana's first responders and the Coast Guard to save lives.

I count Louisiana's neighbors among our blessings. Governor Barbour, thank you for being a good neighbor and helping us to move 1.3 million people to safety through our contra-flow plan. And thank you for extending welcome mats to so many of our displaced families. We have also welcomed your families in Louisiana. My heart goes out to the families in your state who lost everything. Our people experienced not just a Louisiana tragedy or a Mississippi tragedy, but an American catastrophe of Biblical proportions.

In Louisiana, the catastrophic failure of our federal levee system eclipsed Katrina, sending floodwaters across New Orleans and the surrounding parishes. Still reeling from round one, we braced for round two. Rita leveled Southwest Louisiana the way Katrina leveled Mississippi.

Katrina took 1100 lives in Louisiana, and we mourn every one of them. Katrina and Rita wreaked a path of destruction through our state that displaced more than 780,000 people, ruined 217,000 homes, closed 18,000 businesses, and left 240,000 people unemployed. All 64 parishes in our state were affected, and I hope you will join me in recognizing presidents and leaders of many of the hardest-hit parishes who are with us today.

Senators, most of you have toured our devastated neighborhoods. I believe you understand the gravity of what has happened. We appreciate your call for additional federal funding, and it has to be sustained. Help us as we ask the rest of Congress to understand. Urge your colleagues to visit our state. Please.

In a hurricane region, we learn from every storm. Our evacuation for Hurricane Ivan resembled Houston's gridlock during Rita. So I revised our plan. The phased evacuation used during Katrina used contra-flow, using both sides of the interstates for outbound traffic.

We efficiently moved 1.3 million people to safety within 36 hours. In other words, we evacuated a population comparable to the entire state of Alaska, or Delaware, or Hawaii, Rhode Island or even Maine. In spite of successfully evacuating over 92% of the population, it is tragically clear that too many were left behind. Some people played hurricane roulette – remaining by choice – and had to be rescued. Others simply could not leave.

We did the best we could under the circumstances. We have to do better. We must do more to make sure local governments succeed. When they succeed, we all succeed. Hurricane season begins on June 1st, and we are enacting lessons learned. Here are some of the steps we are taking:

- Rethinking our evacuation plans to account for the new reality of weakened levees and people living in trailers;
- Requiring additional oversight of evacuation plans for nursing homes and hospitals;
- Revamping primary and secondary Emergency Support Functions under the State Emergency Operations Plan;
- Streamlining credentialing for out of state first responders, and the list goes on.

We saw in Katrina what the nation learned with the collapse of communications systems after 9-11. If you can't communicate, you can't coordinate. In Louisiana, we are working to acquire mobile command units and develop a statewide interoperable solution that incorporates the entire emergency community. I ask Congress to design uniform interoperable standards with dedicated funding.

Please reform the Stafford Act to account for catastrophic events, and to allow the flexibility to adopt common sense cost-saving measures that meet our needs. For example, the Stafford Act forces FEMA to purchase costly temporary housing, when the wiser investment might be permanent housing.

It is not uncommon to hear about evacuation planning, but it is unusual to hear about the inability to repopulate an area after an evacuation. This is the dilemma we face. For our people to return home, we must guarantee their security, housing, jobs, access to health care, a restored infrastructure and improved schools.

Today, I ask Washington to focus on security and housing. Our people deserve a stronger levee system coupled with a long-term plan for hurricane protection and coastal restoration. Louisiana could finance our own long-term solution if Congress would simply give us our fair share of oil and gas revenues from the Outer Continental Shelf.

We would not be here if the levees had not failed. People could have walked or driven home from the Superdome. Our people entrusted their lives and property to levees designed more than 40 years ago. It was like we expected a worn out 1965 Chevy to pass 2006 safety and inspection standards. It is long past time to upgrade. We must replace false security with a reliable 21st Century hurricane protection system based on the most innovative scientific and technological advances.

In the last special session of the legislature, I pushed creation of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority. The CPRA is charged with overseeing levee boards statewide and developing a master plan for coastal and flood protection. Next week, I am convening the legislature to:

- Consolidate levee boards;
- Reorganize New Orleans government to eliminate waste and duplication; and
- Elevate the Director of the Office of Emergency Preparedness Director to directly report to the Governor in order to improve communication.

These new actions are only the latest in a series of tough post-hurricane reforms that Louisiana has enacted to help ourselves rebuild better and stronger than before. For the first time ever, our state adopted a statewide building code to better protect against future storms. Our new reality forced my

decision to cut \$650 million from our budget. We are cracking down on corruption, and have adopted new standards of accountability mandating full disclosure of disaster related contracts by public officials.

In order for our people to return home, we must address at the root many of the inequities that dominated New Orleans and the surrounding communities. Parents need to know that we are committed to building a brighter future for their children. This is why the state is taking over failing New Orleans schools, and insisting on new standards of excellence. We will preserve our unique culture while building an improved future for all of our citizens.

Our people need housing. I want to thank you for the housing relief Congress so graciously sent us through the Community Development Block Grants. But I must tell you that this funding will only take us to the first junction along a road of urgent needs. With more than 70% of the housing loss from Katrina and Rita, 54% of the housing funding does not come close to an equitable solution. We have a plan that will help homeowners whose homes were destroyed clear their mortgages without losing their pre-storm equity, through the Baker Bill. Last week, the White House attempted to kill this bill. Our delegation is urging Congress to consider our proposal.

An investment in the Gulf Coast Region is a wise investment in the economic security of our country. Our port system is one of the nation's largest epicenters of trade and commerce. We produce 25% of the domestic oil needs that drive our economy and are so important to the move towards energy independence. Our cultural contributions are studied and celebrated the world over.

Congress has been generous, but we have a long road ahead of us. We are insisting on accountability and adopting bold reforms at the state level that I hope will echo through the halls of Congress. We are writing the book on lessons learned from a catastrophe. Please be our lasting partner. Stand by us as we rebuild. Our people – hardworking and patriotic American citizens – deserve no less.