

**Testimony by Congressman Mike Ross
Fourth Congressional District of Arkansas**

**United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Field Hearing
“FEMA’s Manufactured Housing Program: Haste Makes Waste”**

April 21, 2006

Thank you for having me here today, and I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the manufactured homes at the Municipal Airport here in Hope, Arkansas. I would like to thank Chairwoman Susan Collins and Senator Mark Pryor for inviting me to join you today.

Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast on August 29th, 2005. Our hearts and prayers go out to all the people that were drastically impacted as a result of this storm, who lost their home and literally everything they owned.

I grew up in this area in Prescott, Emmet and Hope, and graduated in this very city from Hope High School in 1979. It is with great disappointment that I remind you it has been almost eight months since Hurricane Katrina, yet over 10,000 brand-new, fully furnished manufactured homes remain parked in a hay meadow at the Hope Municipal Airport, over 450 miles from the eye of the storm while thousands remain homeless. The situation at the Hope Airport is a symbol of the mishandlings of this disaster by this Administration and by FEMA

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina, FEMA selected the Hope Airport because of the old World War II Army airport facility at this location. They wanted to use the inactive runways, taxiways, and tarmacs as a FEMA staging area. The original purpose was to

store manufactured homes purchased as temporary housing for displaced families before they were sent to the devastated area.

Late last year, these new, 60-and 80-foot-long, 14-foot wide, two and three bedroom fully furnished manufactured homes began arriving at this staging area at the Hope Airport. Until a couple of weeks ago, 10,777 of these manufactured homes arrived at the airport, but never left. These homes were supposed to come in and out of the staging area on a constant basis in order for displaced families to have the opportunity to return their lives to some normalcy.

The problem we are currently facing is that the majority of these 10,777 homes are still at the Hope Municipal Airport and not being used for the reasons they were purchased. FEMA has moved some 300 manufactured homes out of this so called “staging area” and is currently sending another 100 of them to Marmaduke, Arkansas, where a devastating tornado recently left the small town in shambles. I commend FEMA for helping this community, but the bottom line is we still have over 10,000 brand new, fully furnished manufactured homes that remain unoccupied. With thousands of victims from Hurricane Katrina being housed in hotels, it is unacceptable for these homes to sit here unused.

My investigation into why these homes were coming to the staging area but not leaving began when I sent three separate letters to the Acting Director of FEMA, R. David Paulison, dated December 13, 2005; December 15, 2005; and February 1, 2006. I finally received a response from FEMA on February 7, 2006 which stated that FEMA regulations would not allow manufactured homes to be temporarily placed in a flood plain. My question is how FEMA explains spending an estimated \$431 million on these

10,777 manufactured homes to house families when they knew most of them lived in a flood plain.

Under a normal situation, I understand placing manufactured homes in a flood plain is not the safest and most efficient way to house people. But this is not a normal situation and the reality is that almost every displaced family that needs a home lived in a flood plain. This problem could be solved with an Executive Order from the President that allows manufactured homes to temporarily be placed in a flood plain, but we continue to let displaced families go without adequate housing and watch as the taxpayer's money is wasted on hotel rooms while these homes remain here in Hope.

FEMA wants to warn us about the vulnerability of placing the manufactured homes in a flood plain, but they have not taken into account the possibilities of tornados in this area. This portion of the state is commonly referred to as "Tornado Alley." One tornado in the right place could destroy all of these unused manufactured homes at once. What is worse? To have these manufactured homes spread over multiple flood plains in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana housing people who need them, or have them sitting at the airport in Hope, where there will likely be many tornado watches and a few tornado warnings over the next few months.

Another dilemma is about 75% of these manufactured homes are stored in the fields surrounding the airport. With the spring rains upon us these manufactured homes could eventually begin to sink, therefore FEMA has decided to lay gravel on 170 acres of this land, costing the taxpayers \$4.2 million, so that they can continue to store these manufactured homes currently sitting in the hay meadow.

At a time when our government has an \$8 trillion national debt, it is unconscionable how FEMA and this administration can justify spending \$431 million on manufactured homes that are just sitting at the Hope Municipal Airport and an additional \$4.2 million to gravel the surrounding hay meadows. I doubt there is anyone in this country that would criticize the government for spending this money if it was used to house those who lost everything in the wake of this horrific natural disaster, but this is not happening.

This is an example of why taxpayers are fed up with our Government and most importantly, the lack of accountability in our Government. I believe it is time to exercise some common sense and good judgment and move these manufactured homes out of Hope and to the people who so desperately need them.

Thank you again to Chairwoman Collins and Senator Pryor for your invitation and your attention to this problem we all hope to solve.