

Testimony of Hon. Pete Wilson

Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs
September 14, 2005

Disaster Recovery Lessons Learned in California

While the topic of today's hearing is one which all of us here wish had not happened, I am happy to be here today to share some of the lessons we learned in California in dealing with disaster recovery.

First, Gayle and I wish to express our deep concern for the victims of this horrendous event, and for the thousands who are working to restore homes, livelihoods, and communities. The personal devastation of the victims, the chaos that must be tamed, and the demands placed on the men and women engaged in response and recovery are simply unimaginable for someone who has not been on the ground in the middle of this type of event.

Unfortunately, I have far too much experience with the whole subject of disaster recovery.

During my tenure as Governor of California, our state was hit by what seemed at the time an unending series of natural disasters, often of Biblical proportions. Fire, floods, freezes, earthquakes, drought, landslides, pest infestations, civil unrest—we even faced an increase in volcanic activity in Mono Lake, but thankfully no eruption.

While nowhere the scale of the Katrina disaster, California's floods in January 1997 had similar human results. This disaster resulted in eight deaths; the evacuation of 120,000 people; relocation of 55,000 people to 107 shelters; damage or destruction of 30,000 residences and 2,000 businesses; and total damage estimates of about \$2 billion.

The January 1994 Northridge Earthquake resulted in 51 deaths and over 9,000 injured; 22,000 homeless; severe damage or destruction of 54,000 buildings; closure of 14 damaged hospitals; closure of 11 major roads due to the collapse of 7 major freeway bridges and damage to many others; and total damage estimates of \$44 billion. Up to that point, this earthquake was the costliest disaster in US history.

Yet, as often as we were tested, California emerged from each of these unfortunate events stronger than before. We learned how to respond quickly. More importantly, we learned how to get people's lives and communities working again just as quickly.

Some of the actions we found essential to these recoveries:

First, we learned to point the way, not point a finger of blame. In each emergency situation, we were grateful for the commitment of first the Bush Administration and then the Clinton Administration to helping our state work its way towards recovery. There were always things that could have been done better or faster. There was always a need for more resources than what we had or what we got from the federal government. There were always things that simply went wrong. But everyone took the tack that our

first and only focus was to repair the damage and put people and our communities back on their feet. Hindsight and performance reviews came later.

In the case of the Northridge Earthquake response:

Our first job was to make sure people were safe. We then set about slashing the red tape and rules to help those left with no food, no homes, no jobs.

As with any other state and as with Katrina, the National Guard was our first line of response. Over 2,300 Guard members were mobilized to protect public safety, distribute food and water, and set up tents as emergency shelters for thousands of victims. Even though the Red Cross and Salvation Army shelters were not at capacity, these tents were needed because many victims would not enter a building for fear of aftershocks and more damage.

We recruited and deployed over 4,200 state workers to help out—working with the federal Disaster Assistance Centers to cut the long waits and working in all other areas of the recovery where they were needed—outside their agencies and well outside their job descriptions. We made the FEMA Disaster Assistance Centers into a one-stop help center for both federal and state assistance.

We were rebuilding the roads and bridges within 24 hours of the earthquake. I issued an Executive Order suspending all statutes and regulations related to state contracting.

We had Caltrans employees literally walking the rubble with the authority to issue oral contracts to begin clean-up and demolition. We reopened several critical transportation routes within 13 days of the event as a result.

We continued this approach throughout the rebuilding. My goal was to reopen I-10 within 6 months, and every other road within a year. Each contract included an incentive—if the work was late, we charged a fine and if it was completed early, we paid a bonus and the motorists in Los Angeles were happy each time we did. We waived the requirements for lengthy environmental and permitting reviews for strict replacement work—cutting 18 to 24 months off the construction schedule.

I cut the rules impeding recovery in other areas as well:

- Suspending several trucking rules, including the prohibition on nighttime deliveries of food products to keep trucks off the damaged freeways during commute hours, and make sure supplies kept coming into the region.
- Suspended overtime rules to give employers more flexibility in setting work schedules and reducing congestion during normal commute hours.
- Sent my Secretary for Health and Welfare to the hospitals damaged by the quake with the authority to issue on-the-spot approvals for converting facilities to new essential uses.

- Waived fees to speed reinstallation of mobile homes.
- Expedited permitting of reconstruction projects by waiving many of the procedural requirements, and putting staff from all state and local permitting agencies into one building. Business owners and home owners could walk through one door and leave with all the approvals they needed to get their lives back in order.
- Waived the waiting period for unemployment benefits to get aid to those who needed it immediately.
- Eliminated all paperwork requirements for getting a portable classroom, and made 230 units available through a simple phone call from the districts.
- Issued bridge loans and loan guarantees from state resources to help small business owners back on their feet until their federal assistance arrived.

In these and in many other areas, we dealt with the situation as it deserved:
extraordinary events that could not be handled by business as usual.

Each state and each disaster is going to present a unique set of circumstances and a unique set of needs that must be overcome to restore a community to normal as quickly

as possible. But in each case, it is the state that will best know what is needed to help people get back on their feet and well along the road to recovery.

If I had to make one recommendation on what is needed to speed recovery in the Gulf Coast, it would be to give the states the power to make things happen and happen fast. Reinforce the Governors' emergency powers to set anything aside—state and federal statute and regulation—that stands in the way of quick recovery.

In its times of need, California has always been grateful for the help we received from the nation and other states. It's now time for us to help our fellow citizens of the Gulf Coast.

Thank you.