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Homeland Security

United States  
Coast Guard



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**DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY**

**U. S. COAST GUARD**

**STATEMENT OF**

**REAR ADMIRAL ROBERT DUNCAN  
COMMANDER, EIGHTH COAST GUARD DISTRICT**

**ON**

**‘ALWAYS READY’:  
THE COAST GUARD’S RESPONSE TO HURRICANE KATRINA**

**BEFORE THE**

**COMMITTEE ON**

**HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS**

**U. S. SENATE**

**NOVEMBER 9, 2005**

Chairman Collins and Members of the committee: Thank you for this opportunity to address you today and to discuss the Eighth Coast Guard District's role in the response to hurricane KATRINA. I am extremely proud of the way my Eighth District personnel performed as well as the literally thousands of other Coast Guard personnel from around the country that provided critical and invaluable efforts to making this a truly Team Coast Guard event. The Coast Guard is strategically positioned to play a critical role in effective disaster response because of our unique military, multi-mission, and maritime characteristics. Those characteristics were crucial to our overall performance during and after KATRINA.

To best describe our systematic approach to preparing for catastrophic events such as KATRINA, I will focus on three key attributes of Coast Guard operations: our multi-mission focus, our organizational flexibility, and our continual examination and improvement of exercised plans. Whether we are answering a distress call or responding to an oil spill, response is what we do daily. The operational concept employed throughout the Coast Guard embraces a structured chain of command - while still emphasizing decentralized, on-scene command and control. We routinely delegate authority to qualified people at the lowest possible level because it facilitates rapid response and maximizes effectiveness in dynamic environments. Coast Guard personnel are trained, almost from the day they come aboard, to use Coast Guard doctrine and regulations, an institutionalized operational risk management process, and their own professional and personal experience to make appropriate decisions at the scene of the operation. A significant operational benefit of this is that when disasters occur and communications difficulties develop, our crews still function effectively and achieve desired objectives consistent with command-directed priorities.

Coast Guard standardized training is critical to effective surge operations. Standardized training and equipment allowed people, boats, and aircraft from all over the Coast Guard to surge into the Eighth Coast Guard District and begin operations immediately. For instance, in some cases boat crews responded from Maine, pollution responders came from Connecticut, and support personnel deployed from Alaska. Every Coast Guard air station in the country contributed. A typical helicopter conducting search and rescue may have had an aircraft commander from Massachusetts, a co-pilot from North Carolina, a flight mechanic from Michigan, and a rescue swimmer from Florida. In this example, the aircraft itself may have come from California. All integrated seamlessly because of our rigorous standardization and training programs that ensure mission success, and crew safety.

Hurricanes are a fact of life along the Gulf coast. Each spring, prior to the "official start" of hurricane season, the Eighth District and all of our subordinate units exercise our hurricane plans and make adjustments as needed. This annual exercise is not only an operational check of unit readiness, but also an opportunity to stress the importance of personal and family hurricane plans to all our members. We take hurricanes seriously in the Eighth District, and in the past year we aggressively responded to several significant hurricanes. We visit State, municipal and other emergency operations centers, as well as all our pre-designated primary and secondary "safe havens" in conjunction with these exercises. We validate critical phone numbers, ensure unit materiel readiness, and verify that appropriate liaison officer positions are filled. Additionally, we review and exercise our Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) to ensure our uninterrupted ability to maintain essential functions. As crises are dynamic events, we carefully assess our plans during a response to ensure the planning factors fit the situation that is unfolding - and then adapt our plans as appropriate.

As KATRINA approached the Gulf Coast, we responded by taking several actions in advance of the storm's projected landfall. I authorized the evacuation of dependents and initiated the COOP to relocate elements of the District staff from New Orleans to St. Louis, MO. We broadcast warnings to mariners and the offshore community. We pre-positioned District aircraft and surface assets to places which ensured their survival, and their ability to respond immediately to tasking by appropriate command authorities. For example, the Seagoing Buoy Tender Coast Guard Cutter CYPRESS, home ported in Mobile was pre-staged in Houston, TX, and loaded with as many Aids to Navigation supplies as she could physically carry. Her standing orders were to proceed to the KATRINA-impacted area as soon as it was safe to transit. In the days preceding KATRINA's arrival, I had several discussions with my Sector Commanders, as is my standard practice. I also routinely discussed the situation with Vice Admiral Vivien Crea, the Coast Guard Atlantic Area Commander. As a result of our dialogue, Vice Admiral Crea authorized the availability of a Medium Endurance Cutter to act as a command and control platform on the Mississippi River. This cutter, the SPENCER, was on scene two days after KATRINA hit. This was possible only because we anticipated the need and I had frequent, open communications with the Area Commander, which continued throughout the event. I was able to request and move assets as needed because we have a long history of flowing resources to critical areas from all over the Coast Guard. As soon as it was apparent that KATRINA would make landfall in heavily populated areas, units around the Coast Guard were preparing to deploy in support of any request we might make. District Commanders and resource providers throughout the Coast Guard anticipate these needs and ensure a high state of readiness so their assets could be deployed to affected areas without delay.

Although communications were sometimes a problem for all responding agencies in the impacted area, we overcame gaps through a variety of methods including pre-purchased and pre-staged satellite phones, text messaging, and commercial e-mail accounts. My command and control center maintained uninterrupted telephone and computer connectivity as we moved it to St. Louis early in this event. In addition, I operated out of a Forward Command Element in Louisiana. This allowed me to make frequent personal visits to the impacted areas to gain first-hand situational awareness and meet directly with key leaders and government officials. Another important factor was that all units were intimately familiar with my goals for hurricane preparation and response, and that intent was widely disseminated through the chain of command, including by personal calls to my Sector Commanders. The efforts and results of Team Coast Guard attest to the fact that my intent was communicated, understood, and executed – including by those additional resources that came from outside the Eighth District.

Close contact with officials at all levels of government was a critical success factor. I personally called Governors Blanco and Barbour in advance of the hurricane's impact to brief them on Coast Guard preparations and intentions, and to ensure alignment with State priorities. Staffing the various Emergency Operations Centers at the State and local level with Coast Guard liaisons was a valuable lesson learned from previous hurricanes. I and my Sector Commanders detailed representatives well-versed in Coast Guard capabilities, limitations, and responsibilities to fill these key liaison officer positions. They communicated directly with me, the Sector Commanders, and their Federal, State and local counterparts during this incident. To promote synergy and alignment of effort, we placed a flag officer, two current unit commanding officers, and several other senior officers as liaisons to many elements including the Principal Federal Official, Joint Field Office, and Joint Task Force.

Chairman Collins, I could not be happier with the efforts and accomplishments of the Coast Guard's men and women in their response to this disaster. Selflessly putting aside their own personal losses (579 currently have uninhabitable homes) they performed extraordinary feats to rescue over 33,544 people. I have been greatly privileged to lead and serve with them.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.