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**TESTIMONY**

**BEFORE THE**

**Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee**

**ON**

**HURRICANE KATRINA: PERSPECTIVES OF FEMA'S OPERATIONS  
PROFESSIONALS**

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Good morning Chairman Collins and members of the Committee. My name is Scott Wells, and I am honored to appear before you today. My current position with FEMA is Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) in Louisiana for Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. I would like to start this morning by thanking you for the invitation to testify before this committee. I appreciate the opportunity to share my perspective on the FEMA operations before, during and after our nation's costliest disaster, Hurricane Katrina. It is my intention today to speak candidly with you about my experiences in Louisiana, both leading up to and following Hurricane Katrina, as well as about my perspectives on emergency management. The views expressed in my testimony are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of FEMA or the Department of Homeland Security.

I will begin my testimony today with a brief overview of my professional career in emergency management.

For almost two decades I have served in various emergency management positions. Beginning in 1985, I served for two (2) years as a first-responder MEDEVAC pilot. During my twenty-four year military career, I also spent ten (10) years in the Pentagon providing military support to civilian authorities. My last military

assignment in the Pentagon was as the Military Liaison Officer to FEMA. In these assignments I was involved in numerous disasters and emergencies such as Hurricane Andrew, the Northridge Earthquake, the Midwest floods of 1993, the Oklahoma City Bombing, the Haitian/Cuban Immigration Emergency, the Waco Siege, and the Ruby Ridge incident.

I retired from the Army in 1999 and have been working for the Federal Emergency Management Agency as a Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) for the past 6 years. I have served as Federal Coordinating Officer for several disasters and emergencies throughout the United States including Tropical Storm Allison in Texas and the Columbia Shuttle Recovery Operation.

On 27 August, 2005, I was assigned to Louisiana as the Deputy Federal Coordinating Officer to Bill Lokey for Hurricane Katrina. I served in that capacity until 19 September. At that time, I was reassigned to Texas as the Federal Coordinating Officer for Hurricane Rita, as she made her way through the Gulf of Mexico. As the FCO for Rita, I remained in Texas until the first week of October, at which time I returned to Louisiana to replace Bill Lokey for Hurricane Katrina.

Detailed preparation for a Katrina landfall in Louisiana started in earnest on Friday, 26 August when the National Weather Service quickly changed the projected zone for landfall to include Louisiana. Much work had been done earlier in the week, but the focus of those efforts—given the projected path of the storm--was on Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi. Team deployments to Louisiana began on Saturday, 27 August, with the Emergency Response Team- Advanced (ERT-A) and Emergency Response Team-National (ERT-N) elements deploying to the Louisiana Emergency Operations Center in Baton Rouge. The federal regional and national staffs consolidated that night and started conducting field operations in preparation for landfall. In addition to the command and control element being set up in Baton Rouge we concurrently were setting up an Operational Staging Area in Alexandria, Louisiana, that served as a federal logistics base for Katrina operations.

The first actual employment of federal resources—that is, where we provided response assets to the state—occurred on Sunday when we shipped 6 truckloads of water and 3 truckloads of MREs to the Superdome. Two of the truckloads (one each water and MRE) did not complete delivery. They were denied entry by the Louisiana State Police before reaching the Superdome. This was soon followed by many other response resources such as medical teams, search and rescue teams, and additional critical commodities such as water, food, and ice.

There has been much said about the slow federal response to Katrina. From my perspective I want to say nothing could be further from the truth. We had a fully operational logistics base, a fully operational command cell, and response teams in place—all before landfall. We even moved some supplies in before landfall and attempted to move in a medical team. On the day of landfall we moved search and rescue teams, medical teams, and critical supplies into the affected area. That was fast; it may not have been enough for an event of this magnitude, but it was fast.

I think the real issue is that the response was not robust; it was not enough for the catastrophe at hand. As you look—as we all look to make it better next time—I think it's an important distinction to make. Slow means one thing; not enough means something else. The corrective actions between fixing “slow” and “not enough” could be significant.

Emergency management is unlike any other system in the government; it is a bottoms-up approach; the people on the ground are in charge. The first responders are supported, as required, by local government, then state government, and, as a last resort, the federal government. Ultimately, authority for disaster response operations rests at the local level. The state and federal governments are not in charge but are responsible for assisting local governments. And that is how it should be as all disasters are local—disasters start at the local level and disasters end at the local level. This system works for small to medium disasters. It does not work so well for large disasters, and it falls apart for a catastrophic disaster. I think that is a fundamental problem with the response to Katrina.

Following are some of the other major problems and proposed changes I believe could improve our national—local, state, and federal—readiness posture to respond to future disasters.

**Need to strengthen the emergency management capability at the state and local level.**

- There is very little capability at the state and local level. States generally have not allocated sufficient resources for a viable capability for medium-to-large disasters much less a catastrophic one.
- State/local communities generally do not have on hand--ahead of a disaster--adequate critical supplies and equipment such as water, food, generators and communications equipment to be self sufficient for the first 72 hours following a disaster. This results in the federal government taking on a “first-responder” role in emergency management, which is outside the scope of the federal mission.
- Local/state emergency management staff size (and expertise in many cases) is generally inadequate to perform the critical functions during response operations. This also applies to pre-disaster planning and preparedness activities. States do not have sufficient staff and resources to accomplish the requisite planning/preparedness activities to attain a viable readiness posture for a large to catastrophic disaster.

**Need to review the emergency management architecture for response and recovery operations. There are problems associated with the implementation of the Stafford Act as it is executed through the National Response Plan (NRP) and the Incident Command System (ICS).**

- The emergency management community at the state/local level has not embraced ICS. The level of acceptance and understanding of ICS is highly situational depending on the state. States like Mississippi embrace the concept, and it worked there for Katrina. Unfortunately, in Louisiana, there was little to no understanding of ICS prior to Katrina. Senior emergency management officials did receive some ICS

training 2-3 days after Katrina made landfall, but this training was too little, too late. It must be done before a disaster strikes.

- There are a couple of inherent conflicts in the execution of the Stafford Act using the architectures of the NRP and ICS. First, ICS is a system where requirements are identified at the lowest level and sourced from the lowest to highest level (county/parish to federal government). This is accomplished by the Incident Commander sending his requirements to the parish/county emergency manager who—in the event he cannot meet the requirements—forwards to the state who—again, in the event it cannot meet the requirements—forwards to FEMA. In disasters this system is often trumped by the political process where a Mayor, or parish president/county executive goes directly to the state looking for resources to meet his/ her requirements. Some of this is understandable and even needed, but only as a matter of exception. In my observation, as matter of rule in disaster operations, the political process is often dominant over the ICS process—resulting in duplicative systems. Second, the Stafford Act is based on the federal government providing supplemental assistance to a state when the state is overwhelmed. ICS is based on who can best meet a need. The ICS is a much faster process however, operations can be slowed somewhat by following the Stafford Act process. For example, the federal government, as a matter of process, fills needs identified by the state. Many times, we know what the needs are but wait for the state to fill these needs through its state processes such as the Emergency Management Assistance Compact. If the state fails to meet these needs they come to FEMA, but it's often several days after the resource is needed that the federal government gets the request. Ultimately, as a result, when FEMA fills the need it then appears and is reported that we have filled the need too late or failed to act in a timely fashion.

**Need a trained, staffed, and equipped RESPONSE TEAM.**

- **There is insufficient training for personnel involved in response operations.**

What we currently have is a very basic “101” type of training. We need more individual and team training institutionalized for response team members. We also need to have advanced training on critical operations such as chemical, biological, radiological scenarios. Katrina taught us that we also need to look at other operations as well, such as evacuation, continuity of government, re-entry, and restoring critical and economically important infrastructure.

- ***The overwhelming majority of federal response team members have response operations as their secondary or tertiary jobs.***

*Response team members must have response operations as their primary jobs—just like first responders such as firefighters and police.* Although we’re not first responders, we do work in a time sensitive environment that; requires us to operate at a very fast-paced tempo, requires us to make quick decisions with 10-20% of the information we normally need to make decisions, requires us to have instant credibility and trust in our co-workers because the decisions we make can be and are life saving; requires us to have the requisite skill set to operate and make decisions based on our expertise (there is not enough time to go look something up in a response operation). Anything less than a primary job is inadequate for a response team member.

- **We do not have the force structure needed for major response operations.**

Regions do not have sufficient manpower to man a Regional Response Coordinating Center and a full ERT simultaneously. Most significantly, there is a gross lack of senior management and planning expertise in response operations. Critical functions such as operations, logistics, and plans are very thin and one-deep in many cases. With the present force structure we can perform the mission for small and medium size response operations, but in large-to-catastrophic operations we are woefully short. As an example, for Katrina, we did not have sufficient Emergency Response Team staff for a day shift, much less a night shift. During the early days of the disaster, team members had to work around the clock in many cases.

- **We rely on contractors and Department of Defense (DOD) for most all of our equipment needs except for the US&R and DMAT teams.** We need communications equipment for connectivity to state and local communities, a limited number of vehicles for movement of critical commodities, and immediate access to helicopters and busses.

**Need to change financial management of disasters.** *The current system does not provide the maximum benefit and return on the taxpayers' dollars, hampers states in the execution of their responsibilities, and degrades disaster response & recovery operations.* States don't have enough financial strength to fund disasters up front. They often times have to call a special legislative session or take administrative actions to fund the non-federal share of disaster operations. One of the most common actions states take is to request the federal government pay 100% of disaster costs. **We must never do this; we should give states loans in lieu of 100% federal funding.** When states pay no costs, the result is invariably greater inefficiency, waste, and unwarranted costs. Loans by their very nature would give states greater ownership in disasters, force more fiscal discipline, and eliminate any gamesmanship in the decision making process at state/local levels during disaster operations. These loans should be provided up front.

**Simplify the Public Assistance (PA) process:** Currently, it takes too long and costs too much to put federal dollars into the hands of the communities that need cash quickly to rebuild and recover. The administrative process for executing PA is fundamentally flawed, resulting in confusion, high administrative costs, and delays in processing applications for federal funding. The process needs to be simplified and modeled after the private sector home insurance program where an inspector visits the site, makes an inspection, determines the federal share, and writes the check all in one visit.

**Simplify Individual Assistance (IA) process:** The current IA process is too complicated, which often results in confusion and delays in timely delivery of cash and assistance to individuals.

- We confuse citizens who apply for assistance. When we send them a check, we don't send them an explanation of eligible expenditures with the check. The explanation is sent in a subsequent mailing. . . . Also, some of our explanations can be confusing. For example, if someone has insurance, we send them a note saying they are "ineligible". Actually, they may or may not be eligible; what we should be telling them is that they need to settle up with their insurance company before we can provide those funds.
- The sub-caps, within the \$26,200 total, should be removed. The repair and replace caps are insufficient in many cases and result in giving disaster victims poor options. For example, if someone had \$12,000 in damages to his home, we could only give him approximately \$5,000 to repair the home because of a cap. That means the victims don't have enough money to fix the home, so we provide a travel trailer for a temporary residence. . . It costs much more, in money and time lost, to put the victims in a travel trailer than it does to give the victims the \$12,000 originally needed to repair their home.
- Temporary Housing is not cost effective or customer oriented. It can cost up to \$90,000-\$100,000 per mobile home for a group site (total costs for site preparation, hauling and installation, and cost of home) and \$30,000 -\$40,000 for a travel trailer. Families can stay in this temporary housing for up to 18 months, but then they are required to leave. If we gave them the maximum of \$26,200, many of these families would have the resources to find permanent housing immediately. This would allow them to quickly get on with rebuilding their lives and afford them an immediate permanent housing solution. It also saves the U.S. taxpayer hundreds of thousands of dollars.

**Leadership & management.** We need to invest in leadership and management within FEMA.

We do not have a system for "growing" leaders and managers. We should do a better job of

rotating and cross-training our management and other staff between Headquarters and the field. This would help us better execute our mission and facilitate communication, create better understanding of roles and responsibilities, help us to more effectively achieve all of our objectives, and foster teamwork. This would also help avoid putting policy makers in the awkward position of having to develop, modify, execute, and explain policy without the field experience necessary to understand and appreciate the ramifications of policy decisions.

Emergency management is not a simple system; accordingly, there are no simple solutions. To have an effective national disaster response structure, we must have a viable and fully integrated and coordinated local, state and federal capability. If any of these links in the emergency management chain breaks, the system starts to break down. If we cannot have viability at all three levels of government, then we should change the system.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share a field perspective of the response to Hurricane Katrina and of emergency management in general. I will be pleased to answer your questions.