Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery and Intergovernmental Affairs
Of the
Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee

2011 Spring Storms: Picking Up the Pieces and Building Back Stronger
June 19, 2011

Senator Mary Landrieu
Opening Statement

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this timely and very important hearing on the devastating storms that swept across the country this spring and the status of ongoing recovery efforts.

I recently hosted an event through the Congressional Hazards Caucus on this subject along with my co-chairs Sen. Ben Nelson and Sen. Murkowski, where we heard from the head of the National Windstorm Impact Reduction Program at the National Institute for Standards and Technology (NIST), the director of the National Weather Service's office in Birmingham, and the American Society of Civil Engineers, about improving forecasting, warnings, and structural resistance to tornadoes. I'm very pleased to have the opportunity today to hear from members of the communities that have been affected by these storms and from our federal partners who have helped support response and recovery in their aftermath.

As you all know, this has been a particularly active year of violent tornadoes. From April 26th to 28th alone, 312 tornadoes touched down in 8 southeastern states, causing 347 confirmed deaths and an estimated $2 billion in damage, including more than 10,000 homes destroyed. Then on Sunday, May 22nd, Joplin, Missouri experienced a deadly tornado that killed 153 of its citizens and caused an estimated $1-3 billion in damage, including 2,000 destroyed structures.

Of the 53 disaster declarations that have been issued so far this year, 30 of them resulted from the devastating storms that swept across the country this spring. The federal government has disbursed $180 million in Individual Assistance payments to more than 40,000 households and another $50 million in Public Assistance payments to state and local governments, including $1.3 million to Louisiana, which experienced several weeks of severe floods beginning on April 25th.

We are here today to learn more about the physical, economic, and human toll of these disasters, to find out what went right and what went wrong during the response phase, to assess recovery progress and challenges, and to consider ways we can better protect our families, property, and communities through smarter, safer building practices, as well as effective alert and warning procedures. Developing and enforcing strong building codes, constructing safe rooms, distributing NOAA weather radios, and using traditional and social media technology to communicate with the public, are just a few of the ways we can help reduce our vulnerability to tornadoes and their consequences.

It is also critical that we address the shortfall in FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund to avoid stalling out recovery and mitigation projects in these communities, and that the Senate reject irresponsible House-passed cuts to preparedness grants, which helped save lives and reduce human suffering in the aftermath of these storms. Furthermore, government at all levels must engage the private sector during the recovery phase, utilize our Small Business Development Centers, and accelerate the disbursement of SBA disaster loans and USDA crop insurance payments to help our business owners and farmers get back to work.

There are some very encouraging signs that FEMA's partnerships on the ground with state and local emergency managers have been robust, and that communities are taking advantage of opportunities to mitigate their risk, through such means as storm cellars, safe rooms, building codes, and hazard insurance. With the assistance of FEMA subsidies from the Hazard Mitigation program, Mississippians have constructed 1,165 storm shelters, 1,105 of which are individual shelters (with an average cost of $3,072 and average reimbursement of $2,304). Another 10,000 shelters have been built in Oklahoma through the State's safe room rebate program that also leverages FEMA Hazard Mitigation dollars.

However, significant populations in American lack sufficient hazard insurance for their home or business, and the uninsured victims of these disasters will face significant rebuilding challenges. The Southern United States, where many of these storms hit, has the lowest hazard insurance absorption rate of any region in the country, at 82.6% compared to 96% nationwide, and in many parts of the South, poverty and unemployment rates vastly exceed the national average. It is critical that our nation find a sustainable method to finance disaster risk for all segments of the population.

I look forward to the witnesses' testimony and the opportunity to examine these issues in greater detail during the course of today's hearing, and I thank the Chairman for his ongoing commitment to improving our nation's emergency management system.