

Chairman Landrieu's Opening Statement

Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery

"Are We Ready? A Status Report on Emergency Preparedness for the 2009 Hurricane Season"

June 4, 2009

Good afternoon and welcome. This week marks the beginning of the 2009 Hurricane Season, and I have convened this hearing to evaluate our nation's capacity to respond to a major storm. Today's witnesses will offer a diverse set of perspectives from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. This hearing also marks the first occasion that the new Administrator of FEMA has testified before Congress since his confirmation, and we are particularly honored to have him with us here today.

Hurricane Response Affects the Entire Nation

This hearing is focused on hurricane response, but we will be examining issues that affect the entire nation. The Ranking Member and I both represent states that have been devastated by major hurricanes in the past. 2004, 2005, and 2008 were particularly hard years for communities along the Gulf Coast. But it is important for the people of the United States to understand that our capacity to deal with hurricanes directly reflects our ability to handle a terrorist attack in Washington or New York, an earthquake in California, or a nationwide pandemic flu outbreak. That is the reason for this committee's continued emphasis on an all-hazards approach to disaster management. It is also important for people to understand that hurricanes affect communities all over the country, not just on the coast. Louisiana evacuees with critical needs sought refuge from the 2008 hurricanes in Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and other inland states. And economic interdependencies within our nation's supply chain can cause job losses, business failures, and price spikes far away from the area of impact.

2008 Hurricane Response and Recovery

I would like to say a few words about the devastating hurricanes that struck Texas and Louisiana last year, because the response to those events demonstrated progress made as well as areas that still require significant improvement. The evacuation effort for Gustav and Ike was the largest in U.S. history. Louisiana moved 2 million people out of harm's way including the elderly, disabled, and those without transport who were left behind during Katrina. Texas kept Houston residents at home so the roads would be clear for people on the coast to flee from Ike without getting stuck in traffic as they did when Rita was approaching. Communication and coordination between different levels of government was better, FEMA declared a pre-landfall disaster in both states and surged resources into the area before impact, and the federal levees held.

There were also problems though. Insufficient quantities of generators forced hospitals in Baton Rouge to evacuate patients. Local governments waited days for commodities like ice, water, MREs, and blue tarps. The State of Louisiana's bus contractor failed, and evacuees were forced to take school buses without air conditioning or bathrooms as a result. Evacuees from Texas and Louisiana arrived in Shreveport and Bastrop shelters that were grossly unfit for occupancy. 2,500 people were forced to use the same shower facility, and Mayor Cedric Glover testified before this subcommittee on September 23rd that cots and towels arrived 17 days after they were ordered. Local levees in parts of South Louisiana failed flooding thousands of homes. And people became frustrated with inconsistent reimbursement policies for evacuation costs.

Recovery has also continued to be a frustrating and cumbersome process for individuals and local governments despite several recent improvements under the new administration. FEMA turned once again to trailers in order to meet housing needs, the agency's mission to support long-

term community recovery received scant attention, and the same headaches have returned among local officials struggling to remove debris and rebuild infrastructure under a convoluted and inefficient reimbursement program. Congress also had to act for the third time in three years to legislatively remove a cap on Community Disaster Loans that has made them consistently inadequate to help local governments stay online.

We have asked representatives from FEMA, the Department of Defense, the private sector, the American Red Cross, and the 2-1-1 service referral system to discuss lessons learned from last year's storms and their organizations' efforts to prepare for the 2009 hurricane season. We look forward to hearing their testimony.

Administrator Fugate from FEMA will discuss the 2008 hurricane response and the agency's work on alert and warning systems, evacuation planning, mission assignments to other agencies, contingency contracting, pre-staged resources, Regional Hurricane Plans and exercises, communications support, citizen preparedness, disaster housing, and long-term recovery planning.

Major General Grass from U.S. Northern Command will outline the Department of Defense's support mission for hurricane response, including aerial storm surveillance, air medevac, search and rescue, communications support, logistics support, recent hurricane response exercises, and NORTHCOM coordination with state National Guard contingents. In addition to his responsibility for operations at NORTHCOM, General Grass is also a member of the Missouri National Guard.

Mr. George Foresman is a former DHS official who is here today to talk about the private sector's role in disaster response, the National Blueprint that his organization has developed to assist companies and communities with emergency planning, and his group's outreach efforts in Charleston and Galveston to help support and leverage the private sector and strengthen its links to government and nonprofits.

Frank Mascelli will talk about the American Red Cross' preparedness efforts, including its joint initiative with FEMA to update the National Shelter System, which provides real-time information on the location and capacity of 55,000 facilities nationwide. The Red Cross has increased its volunteer base from 23,000 to 90,000 people since Katrina, and it plays a key role in coordinating efforts across the nonprofit sector.

Finally, Mrs. Janet Durden joins us on behalf of the Northeast Louisiana United Way, which operates a 2-1-1 call center in Monroe, Louisiana. Mrs. Durden's call center picked up the slack in 2005 when Katrina and Rita knocked out offices in New Orleans, Lafayette, and Lake Charles. The Monroe call center kicked into high gear again when Gustav and Ike took out coastal call centers in Texas and Louisiana last year. 2-1-1 is active in 45 states and serves 80% of the nation's population by providing a wide array of service referrals to evacuees. The system's call volume and its role in emergency response has increased exponentially in the last several years.

Emergency preparedness is not the exclusive responsibility of the federal government or individual agencies within it. State and local officials, nonprofit organizations, private sector businesses, and individual citizens must all contribute to the mission in order for our nation to succeed at protecting life and property from disasters.

Recovery and mitigation are critical to protecting communities from future threats, and our ability to respond will suffer if we do not focus attention and resources on those missions. I would like to commend FEMA on several specific steps it has taken to improve the recovery framework by developing: 1) expedited decision teams to resolve Public Assistance disputes; 2) a Public Assistance steering committee with representatives from each of the ten FEMA regions to ensure that policies promote efficiency, effectiveness, and consistency; 3) and a reserve workforce and contingency contract to provide planning support for Long-Term Community Recovery in hard-hit

areas (ESF-14). Although this hearing is focused on emergency management, we also need to transform flood protection systems in America and harden our critical infrastructure.

I solemnly hope that our nation will be spared the wrath of another devastating storm this hurricane season, but we cannot avert disaster indefinitely. By continually testing, evaluating, and improving our emergency response capabilities, we increase the possibility that we as a nation may one day answer the question “Are we ready?” with a resounding “Yes.” That is the purpose to which we will dedicate our efforts here today and for the foreseeable future.