

Statement of Christopher Masingill, Federal Co-Chairman of the Delta Regional Authority before the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery and Intergovernmental Affairs hearing “2011 Spring Storms: Picking Up the Pieces and Building Back Stronger”, 2:30 PM, July 19, 2011

Chairman Pryor, Senator Paul, esteemed Members of the Committee: it is a privilege for me to be here today and to testify before the Subcommittee on the effects of the recent weather disasters on the Delta Regional Authority’s territory and its people. The DRA has a unique relationship with the Governors of our eight state region, and because of the work we do year-round with local development districts, we were positioned to see the storms (and the recovery efforts that followed) through their eyes. While a number of our member states were struck by devastating tornadoes, for which DRA offered its support and assistance, the majority of the damage in the DRA territory caused by those storms manifested itself in the catastrophic flooding along the Mississippi River, so my statement will focus primarily on that event.

Overview of Situation

During the month of April, the Mississippi River Basin received 600% of its annual rainfall in a three week period. This unprecedented amount of rain would lead to a flood of historic proportions along the Mississippi River and test the levee systems that protect millions of families in the Delta as never before. In late April and early May, the governors of states along the river declared states of emergency to prepare for the impending flood and Deltans began making preparations to protect their lives, homes, and property as best they could. Over the next two weeks the Mississippi River rose to levels unseen since the 1927 flood, and in many locations surpassing those levels by several feet. The high water forced the Army Corps of Engineers to make the difficult decision to breach the New Madrid levee system at Birds Point, MO and later opening the Bonnet Carre’ and Morganza spillways in Louisiana. Throughout the ordeal, the Corps of Engineers and local levee districts worked tirelessly to inspect, maintain, and repair any levee issues that arose. Through their diligence and hard work, the levee systems worked as designed and no failures of mainline levees occurred. Unfortunately, the levees along many of the tributaries of the Mississippi did not fare as well. Due to the massive quantities of water flowing down the main river channel, as well as the significant rainfall across the region, many of the numerous rivers, lakes, and streams that feed into the main river channel were unable to drain and left their banks to overtop or break the levees that were designed to contain them. The backwater flooding that resulted was the cause of the majority of flood damage to many of the DRA states.

Total damage throughout the Delta Region is still being assessed, but countless homes, businesses, and public property have been impacted. Moreover, floods have damaged millions of acres up and down the river.

DRA Involvement

Throughout the disaster, DRA maintained two-way contact with local, state, and federal contacts to the fullest extent possible. Hearsay and misinformation were rampant across the region and I wanted to make sure that any information that DRA passed along was accurate and up to date. DRA received daily status updates from several Corps districts and made numerous phone calls to local development districts; local, state, and federal elected officials; and non-profits in order to offer assistance and gather information. DRA staff took part in meetings of state and federal disaster taskforces and state legislature committee hearings and helped provide information to leaders and the public on the many steps that need to be taken in the wake of a disaster. Many people do not think of DRA when it comes to disaster response and recovery, but I hope that our involvement during this time of need as well as DRA's being a part of the Emergency Support Function - 14 Long-Term Community Recovery Annex to the National Response Framework will bolster the fact that DRA stands ready to assist state, regional, and local entities by coordinating long-term community recovery; assist in streamlining response; identify responsibilities for recovery activities; and provide a coordinating entity to maintain continuity of deliverability to those negatively affected by any disasters that may affect our region.

Committee Questions

Unique Challenges

The significant loss in agricultural production is a serious challenge facing our region. Agriculture is one of the leading industries in the Mississippi Delta, and as a result of the flooding of large percentages of that farm land, producers and others in Ag-related industries are facing significant economic burdens. For example, there was significant agricultural damage to Southeast Missouri following the Corps of Engineers' decision to lower the flood stage on the Mississippi River by breaching the Birds Point – New Madrid levee system on May 2nd. While this disaster happened early enough for some planters to get a crop in the ground, it wasn't necessarily the crop they wanted or the crop in which they specialize. Several DRA member states also have casinos on the river which were forced to close, resulting in thousands of jobs furloughed and millions lost in tax revenue to states and counties.

Efficiency of Response

The public outreach and information sessions that were held across the region by FEMA and SBA were very well attended and received. There were numerous avenues used to access those who had been flooded to ensure that they were signed up for the appropriate programs and aware of the assistance for which they were qualified. FEMA and SBA representatives are still manning stations at home improvement and hardware stores across the region assisting people with the disaster filing process. The Mississippi Development Authority highlighted to me how helpful the SBA was in assisting businesses in the wake of the tornados and floods that hit Mississippi. The Corps of Engineers also received high praise from numerous entities across the

region. The opening of the spillways was a point of contention with some states, however the Corps did an exemplary job of maintaining a transparent decision making process for the opening of these structures, as well as keeping the public informed of any relevant information. As previously mentioned, the Corps' work with the local levee district was highly praised as well.

Overall, local opinion seemed to feel that the federal response was well managed; however, the DRA did hear several complaints, universal across the region.

The first touched on the government contracting process. With so many displaced workers in the region, residents were displeased to see contracts being awarded by FEMA to companies located outside the disaster-affected state. While it is understood that the urgency of the response necessitates FEMA having pre-negotiated contracts, I hope to see the recovery phase of a large event allow for more local participation.

Second, the DRA has heard suggestions that groups assisting with recovery might adopt a plan wherein they set up response tents by need, not by agency. When families in Poplar Bluff, Sikeston, or New Madrid had questions about housing, the answers given were often sufficient, but incomplete. Answers might be determined by which government agency (like USDA RD) or NGO (like the Red Cross) an applicant visited first. Comprehensive coordination between the government and relief organizations during a time of relative quiet might allow each to better perform during a time of crisis.

Third, states have noted that the rapid pace at which Individual Assistance was granted was not matched by an equally rapid Public Assistance response. We all recognize that while the housing needs addressed through Individual Assistance are important, Public Assistance programs designed to help counties, states, and non-profits repair their public infrastructure are particularly important to the Mississippi Delta region, where communities can be isolated and extremely self-reliant. While I understand that Individual Assistance was easier to assess, there was an obvious frustration on the ground with the slow approval of Public Assistance.

Finally, DRA heard numerous states criticize mitigation activities undertaken by private residents and businesses. Under FEMA and SBA guidelines, residents and businesses that were flooded are eligible for assistance either through grant or loan for mitigation funding to prevent damage from adverse weather events. States have noted numerous citizens and businesses spent their own money to build levees around their property, move equipment and furniture, and relocate livestock and incurred significant expense doing so. Despite the fact that these precautions undoubtedly prevented more claims for federal disaster aid, these mitigation activities are not eligible for any type of federal assistance in the form of a grant or loan. Altering this regulation could have the added benefit of saving the federal government money without burdening property owners with significant costs for protecting their property. We

suggest a closer working relationship between state and local governments and FEMA, to ensure that work is complementary and maximizes available resources.

Recommendations

In addition to the recommendations above, DRA has several others that I feel could improve future responses to disasters such as this.

Communication between agencies, state government, and locals could be improved upon. During this disaster, some states had excellent communications between all the parties with daily conference calls and meetings organized by the governor's office or state emergency management agencies. However, if these activities were not instituted by the state, it often didn't happen. Instituting a "task force" approach to communication between all involved parties allows everyone to be on the same page, have the same information, and a clear understanding of the mission at hand.

In dealing with long-term recovery, the DRA recommends that agencies begin to think about how they might best work with small businesses, for whom a disaster could mean a loss of income, job reduction or elimination, and even foreclosure.

Although the SBA did a great job at publicizing its disaster loans to the public, I feel that the Economic Injury Disaster Loan program was not publicized as strongly or often as the Home and Personal Property and Business Physical Disaster Loans. The Economic Injury Disaster Loans serve as life support for many small businesses, which have suffered economically from the disaster, by providing low interest loans to cover every day operating expenses, such as payroll and utilities, while the business gets back on its feet. While SBA includes EIDL on press releases and fact sheets, many business owners I spoke with, including those who had attended SBA Business Disaster Meetings, were unaware that this type of loan was available to them. I would recommend putting more emphasis on this unique program that could save numerous small businesses in a disaster area.

Finally, and keeping with the small business theme, in disaster situations, it is important that the government think about how best to coordinate response efforts in order to get small business up and running again as quickly as possible. As a model, I suggest looking at the Louisiana Business Emergency Operations Center (LA BEOC), a joint partnership between Louisiana Economic Development, the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, the National Incident Management Systems & Advanced Technologies Institute at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and the Stephenson Disaster Management Institute at Louisiana State University. The LA BEOC works with businesses to improve their disaster preparedness; improve communication with business and industry before, during and after disaster events; rapidly develop sound economic-impact estimates to support decision making and requests for business assistance; coordinate response efforts; and help coordinate post disaster economic recovery. During this recent round of spring storms, the Mississippi Delta's

small business owners would have certainly benefitted from a federal agency directed to coordinate the same across state lines.

Conclusion

Because disasters affect more than one family and more than one community, it will take a coordinated response from all of us to make sure that long-term recovery is a success. The governors and emergency coordinators of our states went above and beyond during this April's flooding, and no doubt their mitigation efforts and quick response after the catastrophic events saved lives, livelihood, and property. While FEMA and SBA have made great progress on this front, federal agencies would do well to adopt a more coordinated planning effort by incorporating improved communications plans that specifically address small businesses and empowering an agency with the capabilities to get small businesses quickly on their feet.

The Corps of Engineers behaved exemplary, as did FEMA and many other agencies charged with quick response. Now, we must act as professionally as we move to long-term recovery. It will take close coordination and intense focus from all the agencies in FEMA's ESF-14 Annex to recover from the damage done to countless homes, businesses, infrastructure, and public property. The Delta Regional Authority stands ready to do its part.

Again, thank you for extending an invitation to me today. I welcome any questions, and look forward to working with the Committee on improving quality of life for those living along our great Mississippi River.