

Statement of Ranking Member  
Senator Susan M. Collins

**Catastrophic Preparedness:  
How Ready Is FEMA for the Next Big Disaster?**

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
March 17, 2011

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**The earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan last week destroyed entire communities, killed thousands of people, and caused the release of radiation at nuclear power plants. Our thoughts are with the Japanese people and with the rescuers and responders, including units from our own country.**

**This horrific natural disaster reminds us that we need to do our best to prepare for the unpredictable. That is the focus of today's hearing.**

**In the past year, we have witnessed three catastrophes involving the development and use of energy resources.**

- **The explosion aboard the Deepwater Horizon oil rig last spring led to economic and environmental damage that has yet to be completely tallied.**
- **A West Virginia coal mine explosion that killed 29 in August was the worst in decades.**
- **And now, there is uncertainty and fear in Japan about the amounts of radiation emitted from nuclear power plants in the area hit by a tsunami.**

**In addition to the humanitarian crisis, the aftermath of the quake has raised concerns about the safety of nuclear power at a time when it is being revisited as an alternative to fossil fuels and as a means of lowering greenhouse gas emissions.**

**Regardless of whether a disaster strikes our energy supply or another part of our nation, we need to be prepared. We don't know when the next disaster will hit. We do know the U.S. Geological Survey estimates that within the next 30 years the probability is 94 percent that an earthquake of 7.0 magnitude or greater will occur in California. We also know that inevitably, there will be hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes. And we**

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**recognize that a terrorist attack using a weapon of mass destruction in a large city would strain our capabilities.**

**I want to hear today from our witnesses how well equipped the United States is for any catastrophic disaster regardless of the cause. What is our level of preparedness to protect important energy sources? What are we learning from the nuclear accidents in Japan and the Gulf Coast oil spill in the past year? How well are we prepared for a major earthquake in the United States? Do we have the communication and medical systems necessary to respond to the explosion of a dirty bomb?**

**More than four years ago, Congress enacted the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, which the Chairman and I authored. The legislation was designed to take the hard-learned lessons of Hurricane Katrina and bring about improvements in the nation's overall emergency preparedness and response systems.**

**Our law has indeed improved FEMA's disaster response capabilities. From major floods to wildfires, we have witnessed improvements throughout the country. In Maine, I saw this progress in FEMA's responses to the Patriot's Day storm of 2007, the spring 2008 floods in Aroostook County, and other disasters since then. FEMA has become a more effective, better led agency during the past four years. Nevertheless, questions remain about our ability to handle a mega-disaster.**

**I also have concerns about FEMA's stewardship of federal funds.**

**One of those hard-learned lessons from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was that FEMA's assistance programs were highly vulnerable to fraud and improper payments. Our Committee, with the assistance of GAO and the IG, documented more than a billion dollars in misspent funds. In some cases, these taxpayer dollars were literally gambled away. Funds were also spent on bail bonds and diamond engagement rings. FEMA also paid millions of dollars for housing assistance to hundreds of applicants who apparently were in state and federal prisons.**

**While victims should receive appropriate relief, FEMA needs to strike the careful balance between expediting relief and ensuring that criminals do not defraud the system.**

**Unfortunately, safeguarding taxpayer dollars remains an area in which FEMA has yet to achieve success. A December 2010 report by the DHS Inspector General revealed that FEMA had stopped attempting to recover improper disaster assistance payments made after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and subsequent disasters. The Inspector General identified**

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**approximately 160,000 applicants that had received improper disaster assistance payments totaling more than \$643 million.**

**Even more disturbing, FEMA's efforts to recoup these improper payments ended in 2007 after a court found FEMA's recovery procedures to be inadequate. More than three years later, a new process for recovering these payments has only been initiated this week.**

**I do want to point out some bright spots in the September 2010 DHS Inspector General's report. In particular, the IG found that FEMA had made substantial progress in improving emergency communications coordination with officials at the federal, state, and local levels. Ensuring that first responders can communicate during a disaster is vital - indeed, when communications failed after 9/11 and during Hurricane Katrina, it cost lives.**

**The IG also highlights the effectiveness of the regional emergency communications working groups in each of the 10 FEMA regions. These groups, composed of federal, state, and local responders, were established in the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act.**

**This October will mark the fifth anniversary of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act. By that time, I hope FEMA will have made significant progress in improving our nation's preparedness for the next catastrophe.**

**Finally, I want to highlight Inspector General Skinner's service to our country. Mr. Skinner has been a valuable asset as our Committee conducted its oversight of the new department. I appreciate his aggressive approach to combating waste, fraud, and abuse at DHS. Thank you for your service.**

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