

Opening Statement of Senator Mary L. Landrieu
Catastrophic Preparedness: How Ready Is FEMA for the Next Big Disaster?
March 17, 2011

The earthquake and tsunami in Japan serve as a sobering reminder that catastrophic disasters can strike anywhere at any time. The United States has deployed relief supplies, search and rescue teams, and nuclear experts, and the prayers of our entire nation are with the people of Japan during this very difficult time.

It has been 5 years since more than 2,000 Americans were killed when Hurricane Katrina leveled the Gulf Coast, and the federal levee failures in New Orleans left an entire city underwater for several weeks. The Gulf Coast region is still recovering from the devastating impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. We have a lot of work still to do to improve our nation's capacity to prepare for, respond to, and recover from the next major catastrophe. In order to remain vigilant against these threats, we need to reduce vulnerability through smarter land use and building safety standards. We must also strengthen preparedness by developing robust alert and warning systems, training first responders, and testing our plans for evacuation, sheltering, and supply chain management.

Administrator Fugate, I appreciate you being here today to discuss catastrophic preparedness both within your agency and among the many partners in society and government on whom you rely. Your role demands that you provide leadership in ensuring that our Nation is ready for the unknown - in terms of timing, scale, and type of event that could ultimately wreak havoc upon our country.

This is no small task. Emergency management responsibilities in this country are shared among multiple levels of government, the private and nonprofit sectors, and individual citizens. Some of our citizenry is vulnerable, including our children, the elderly, the poor, and the disabled. The resources to support this mission are increasingly limited throughout government and the economy. So continuing to focus on preparing for the unknown in this environment is a serious challenge.

I am very concerned about the current shortfall in the Disaster Relief Fund. FEMA is projected to run out of money more than 3 months before the end of the fiscal year, at the very beginning of hurricane season. I wrote to President Obama over a month ago, asking that he send a supplemental funding request to Congress to plug the \$1.6 billion gap, but he has not taken any action. The Disaster Relief Fund almost ran out of money last year too, and FEMA was forced to freeze recovery and mitigation projects across the country for 5 months because the Administration did not seek funding in a timely manner. Two weeks ago, Secretary Napolitano testified before my Subcommittee that a supplemental was necessary, but we continue to wait. Today, I will be sending another letter to the President, along with a number of my colleagues on this matter. If a catastrophe the size of Katrina struck today, FEMA would run out of money in 3 days. So from a budgetary standpoint at least, the answer to the question posed in the title of this hearing is a resounding "no".

It doesn't make sense to pay for previous disasters by scaling back the agencies that must respond to future ones, but the House recently passed spending cuts to FEMA operations, Coast Guard acquisitions, and grants to State and local first responders. I hope some of you will discuss H.R. 1's potential impacts on catastrophic preparedness.

I would also like to hear our witnesses' views on the Stafford Act's capacity to facilitate recovery from a catastrophic incident, and the importance of linking grant funding to preparedness outcomes.

I appreciate the opportunity to evaluate the progress we have made since Katrina and Rita, and the challenges that remain to improving our ability to respond to and recover from the next catastrophe. As horrific as the situation is in Japan, as we watch the disaster unfold, there is no mistaking the fact that readiness saves lives. Japan leads the world in building safety and citizen preparedness, and thousands of people survived because of it. Those lessons should not be lost upon us.

I thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for calling this very important hearing, and look forward to the witnesses' testimony.