



United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman, ID-Conn.

Opening Statement of Chairman Joseph Lieberman
“Catastrophic Preparedness: How Ready Is FEMA for the Next Big Disaster?”
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
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As Prepared for Delivery

The hearing will come to order. I welcome everyone. We convene this hearing, which had been long-planned, on FEMA’s ability to respond to a major catastrophe against the compelling backdrop of the tragically catastrophic events unfolding in Japan: an earthquake and tsunami in rapid succession that have already resulted twice as many deaths as al Qaeda’s attack on America on 9/11 – and no one believes all the dead have been found yet. The earthquake and tsunami also have caused fires and explosions at nuclear power plants that could have nightmarish consequences for Japan and perhaps other countries as well.

Japan has been considered the gold standard of earthquake preparedness because they’ve had repeated experience with earthquakes, but this earthquake registered 9.0 on the Richter scale. I always when I say that remember that the great San Francisco earthquake was apparently 7.6 on the Richter scale, so you can imagine the consequences here. The waves of disaster set off by this earthquake in Japan have exceeded the country’s extraordinary preparations. So the events of the past week in Japan lend a sense of urgency to our hearing today as ask how well prepared is America for a catastrophe equal to the one unfolding now in Japan.

Our Committee called its 2006 report about FEMA’s response to Hurricane Katrina “A Nation Still Unprepared.” We were then unprepared, and that lack of preparedness shook the confidence of the American people who naturally asked why their government couldn’t help some of their fellow citizens when they needed it the most. This Committee’s extensive investigation into the failure of all levels of government to prepare for and respond effectively to Hurricane Katrina found a long and troubling list of problems, not least of which was that FEMA, in our opinion, was not and never had been capable of responding to a catastrophe like Hurricane Katrina.

Here is where I learned that when it comes to emergency preparedness and response, two words that I thought meant the same, there is a difference between a disaster and a catastrophe. Preparedness for most disasters is different from preparedness for catastrophes like Katrina.

After our investigation, the Committee drafted and Congress passed the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act in 2006. Our aim was to rebuild FEMA into a stronger, more capable agency. Five years later, I am convinced that FEMA has in fact become stronger and more capable. But is it strong enough to respond adequately if a catastrophe like the one currently in Japan struck the United States? I think that’s the question we want to ask our witnesses today

Last September, then Inspector General of the Department of Homeland Security Richard Skinner released a report on FEMA’s transformation since Katrina. Mr. Skinner has since retired from public service after a long and distinguished career, but he’s fortunately back with us to testify today. His report concluded that FEMA has made some progress in almost all areas where reform was needed but that FEMA’s management, to speak broadly, still needed significant improvement.

While today’s hearing is focused on FEMA, I think it’s important to say response to and recovery from disaster is the responsibility of a lot of other agencies and people. Other federal agencies, state and local

governments, the private sector, and in some sense every American have roles to play, and many of them also need to improve their capabilities. On a positive note, the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security, and the Congressionally-mandated Council of Governors, recently signed off on a very important plan establishing clear rules for when both National Guard and military forces can jointly respond after a disaster. This means in a large disaster we will have the ability to call on the resources of the Department of Defense in a more effective and timely manner.

Five years after Katrina, I conclude we are better prepared for a catastrophe than we have ever been. But the epic disaster in Japan reminds us that FEMA must continue to improve. As both old and new threats loom – some from nature, like the earthquake and tsunami, others from human enemies, like the one we faced on 9-11-01, I know Administrator Fugate and the dedicated public servants with whom he works at FEMA will chart a successful path forward.

Senator Collins?