

“The New FEMA: Is the Agency Better Prepared for a Catastrophe in 2008 Than It Was in 2005?”
Chairman Joe Lieberman
April 3, 2008

Good morning. The question before us today goes to the very core of this Committee’s homeland security responsibilities: Is FEMA better prepared for a catastrophe now than it was in 2005?

The answer seems to be a qualified yes, according to a report that will be presented to us today by Department of Homeland Security Inspector General Rick Skinner. The report finds progress in eight of the nine areas reviewed: Moderate progress in five areas, modest progress in three, and little or no progress in one.

While this progress has been made, there is much more that still remains to be done before FEMA, and our country, are prepared for the next catastrophe.

We only need remember those searing images beamed live into our homes of a drowning New Orleans – its people trapped on rooftops or sweltering in the Superdome – to focus our attention and rivet our efforts. We only need recall the needless deaths caused by the failure to adequately

evacuate the poorest, most vulnerable residents, and the ongoing challenges that remain trying to help a devastated region get back on its feet. The failed response to Hurricane Katrina shook the American peoples' confidence in their government and that trust will only be fully restored by steadily improving performance.

To adequately understand where FEMA is today, we have to remember the state of FEMA when Katrina made landfall in 2005. Following the Katrina disaster, this Committee conducted an extensive investigation into what went wrong. The list of failures and inadequacies our investigation uncovered was long.

That's why the Post-Katrina Act, drawn up in this Committee following those hearings, aimed to create a new FEMA – a stronger, proactive disaster response agency that would, for the first time, be equipped to prepare for and respond to a catastrophe like Katrina, or a terrorist attack even worse than 9-11.

Knowing that the Post-Katrina Act was only signed into law in October 2006, I am heartened to see that this IG report concludes there has been real progress across so many fronts in the past year and a half.

I'm also pleased by the way FEMA is working hard to implement these directives and I especially appreciate FEMA's new attitude, which is - if it is legal and it will help somebody - do it!

One thing this report makes clear is that Congress must continue to invest in FEMA if the agency is to realize its full potential. FEMA received a much needed funding increase in the FY 08 Appropriations bill that was an essential first step in the long process of building the new FEMA, but the actual dollars were only received by the agency a few months ago.

An important point running throughout this DHS IG report is that additional substantial funding increases for FEMA are still necessary. In almost every category reviewed - Planning, Coordination and Support, Interoperable Communications, Logistics, Evacuations, Housing, Disaster Workforce, Mission Assignments and Acquisition Management - one of the

reasons continually cited for lack of more substantial progress was a shortage of staff, financial resources or both.

In many cases, the lack of adequate communications in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina's landfall meant that first responders and other key officials lacked the situational awareness needed to respond effectively.

Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour told the committee that the head of the National Guard might as well have been a "Civil War general" for the first two or three days because the only way he could find out what was going on was by actually "sending somebody" to find out and report back.

In the Post-Katrina Act, Congress created the Office of Emergency Communications to lead and coordinate interoperability efforts at the Department. The OEC is up and running today but remains significantly understaffed as the IG's report points out.

Last year, in the Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007, Congress created a new grant program solely dedicated to improving interoperable communications. In the Post Katrina

Act we made FEMA responsible for implementing all of the homeland security grants, including almost \$2 billion in urban area and state homeland security funds, so that they can be more appropriately targeted to strengthen critical systems needed to respond to all hazards - including communications.

So I look forward to hearing our witnesses outline for us what has gone right and how we can improve upon it and what has gone wrong and how we must fix it.

Senator Collins?