

Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

**The New FEMA: Is the Agency Better Prepared
for a Catastrophe Now Than It Was in 2005?**

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
April 3, 2008

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We are approaching the third hurricane season since Hurricane Katrina, and, later this year, the second anniversary of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act that the Chairman and I worked so hard to enact. Today's hearing gives us an opportunity to evaluate how well FEMA has drawn on lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina and acted on Congressional mandates to prepare for a new catastrophe - a challenge we know is inevitable, yet hope will never come.

As I reviewed the report of the DHS Inspector General, I read comments that mirrored my own observations. The IG found that FEMA has made progress in all of the areas reviewed, but that in some areas, the progress has been limited or modest.

I don't believe we should underestimate how difficult it is to completely revamp procedures, processes, and people while continuing to cope with many natural disasters. I know that FEMA has improved and is working hard on its deficiencies. Last year, I saw first-hand the agency's effective response to the Patriots' Day storm in Maine, and I observed a training exercise in Rhode Island and Massachusetts that was impressive in its coordination and scope. The regional approach that the Chairman and I advocated is clearly producing results.

Nevertheless, effective implementation of our comprehensive reforms is essential if FEMA is to learn the lessons of Katrina and to prepare for even worse disasters, such as a biological, chemical, or even a nuclear attack.

Of the nine key areas of readiness reviewed by the IG, four showed only “modest progress” and one was judged to show “limited progress.”

The weakest area concerned mission assignments – the system for issuing and coordinating task orders among federal agencies. Our investigation of the Katrina catastrophe identified fundamental flaws in the mission-assignment process, particularly between FEMA and the Defense Department, that were a major

roadblock to a quick and effective response. I am concerned that progress is lagging in this key area.

The IG report notes obstacles like staffing shortages, inadequate funding, lack of coordination and integration, incomplete strategic plans, lack of accountability, and resistance to change from internal and external stakeholders. For example, the IG tells us that:

- FEMA’s National Preparedness Directorate is about 25 percent under strength;**
- operational plans for disaster response are not finalized;**
- “many gaps” plague the Total Asset Visibility system for tracking commodities,**

- **no single office at FEMA bears responsibility for planning and executing federal evacuations; and**
- **FEMA has still not made significant improvements to the Disaster Workforce system intended to provide rapid reinforcements for disaster response.**

There are some overarching issues as well. The IG observes that FEMA is working on plans for preparedness and response on the Gulf Coast, in the New Madrid Fault seismic zone, and in major cities. But the IG adds that these plans are “very geocentric” and that disaster officials regard them as not readily transferable. Yet, a regional approach focusing on the most likely scenario seems to make

good sense and is consistent with the FEMA reform act.

Moreover, the Department has devoted considerable resources to national planning. For example, FEMA and the Operations Directorate of the Department -- in concert with other Federal departments and agencies -- have been drafting strategic plans for each of the 15 national planning scenarios.

Moreover, just a few months ago, FEMA issued its National Response Framework, which articulates the national doctrines, principles, and architecture for our nation's preparedness for any emergency, whether man-made or natural. And while such planning efforts are absolutely critical, it is important to note that plans are only as effective as

the people implementing them and the adequacy of resources backing them. That is precisely why FEMA's efforts to establish robust regional offices -- as required by the FEMA reform act -- is so vital.

The regional offices are working with state and local governments and first responders on the entire preparedness cycle, including training, exercises, equipment, education, and homeland security grants -- not just planning.

The drive for a stronger and more effective FEMA also requires that we maintain the agency's location within the Department of Homeland Security. FEMA has made real progress, but as the GAO warned us last year, "successful transformations of large organizations, even those faced with less strenuous reorganizations than DHS,

can take 5 to 7 years to achieve.” Another reorganization would simply introduce distractions and disruptions that would undermine FEMA’s progress without addressing any of the issues that have constrained progress.

I look forward to hearing from Inspector General Skinner and Administrator Paulison for guidance on how best to sustain FEMA’s progress and catch up in areas where improvements have lagged. We want to fully realize the promise of the “New FEMA” envisioned in our 2006 reforms.

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