

**Statement**

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Director, Alabama Department of Homeland Security**

**House Committee on Homeland Security  
Subcommittee on Management, Investigations, and Oversight**

**Homeland Security in Rural America  
Training Rural First Responders**

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## Statement

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**Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today representing state and local interests during this important field hearing.**

**As Director of the Alabama Department of Homeland Security, it is my responsibility to manage the homeland security preparedness programs and initiatives Governor Bob Riley wants in place to serve Alabama's citizens and communities. During these past five and a half years of the Riley administration in Alabama, our state has seen exponential improvements in first responder capabilities, citizen preparedness, and situational awareness.**

**Today, in my third appearance before the subcommittee, you have asked me to address homeland security in rural America, and specifically training of first responders in rural America. Let me begin by stating there are three major components to homeland security training: proper equipment, individual and collective training, and exercises. Following a logical sequence,**

**first responders should be properly equipped, trained to standard on individual, team, and organizational skills, and exercised with their equipment and training as part of a multi-agency or jurisdictional exercise. This model is commonly referred to as the crawl, walk, and run methodology to training.**

**In rural America, many of our first responders are volunteers. In fact, volunteer firefighters represent approximately 80% of the total fire service organizations in Alabama. As volunteer organizations, they are routinely in need of new equipment and funds to help them train and conduct exercises.**

**In rural areas, local governments do not have the ability to generate the tax revenue capable of outfitting and training all the first responder organizations serving their population. The homeland security grants the Congress has made available to rural America are making a sea change of difference in how rural areas can prepare for and manage disasters.**

**On behalf of the rural first responders in Alabama, and for my colleagues around the country, please allow me to thank the Congress for the homeland security grants you appropriate every year and make available to rural America. Your continued support is much appreciated and much needed.**

**It is interesting to note that annually more homeland security grant dollars go to the 50 largest cities in America than they do all of rural America and the rest of the country combined. Yet, the metropolitan areas have a much greater ability to generate revenue to outfit, train, and sustain first responders. I highlight this fact because if we are truly serious about protecting our country, we must also recognize America will only be as strong as her weakest link. We must develop and sustain capabilities everywhere, even in rural America, so we are able to safeguard lives and protect property.**

**A problem rural America faces is that it is not the proverbial squeaky wheel. People in rural America are self-reliant. They understand that hardship and disaster are a part of life and the fabric of history. They know how to cope with difficult circumstances and by their very nature are resilient and tough.**

**Calls to government for assistance are not the first calls made by rural Americans. They will always try to solve their own problems first with the help of neighbors, friends, and volunteers before they willingly invite the government into their lives. This philosophy conflicts with Americans who believe the government is responsible for their livelihood and for solving all of their problems.**

**Rural Americans are disaster experienced problem solvers and do not sit back and wait for someone to solve their problems for them. As a result, they will remain the silent majority, and, in some cases, become forgotten because they don't write talking points and clamor for face time in front of news cameras and microphones. They simply do what needs to be done to restore routine in their communities and lives after disaster strikes.**

**I congratulate my fellow citizens in Iowa and the Midwest for their quiet resolve and fierce determination to nobly and proudly recover from one of the worst natural disasters in their history. Iowans today are showing us the strength and silent steely resolve of the American spirit in rural America.**

**Rural Americans are criticized in some circles for clinging to religion, but I thank God they do. The beliefs and shared values of rural America are the moral anchors of this country, and represent the ideals and principles most of us associate with the America of our hopes and dreams. We can never risk losing the faith rural Americans have in their government. We will be in serious trouble as a nation if we do. One way we keep this faith is by responding with all the assistance our government has to offer in the wake of a disaster that overwhelms a rural area.**

**I am reminded of the soldier who was once asked if he'd ever seen heavy combat. The soldier's response was, "If you are in combat, its heavy!" The same can be said of living through a disaster. You can ask if a hurricane, tornado, flood, or fire was severe and devastating and the answer will be, "If it destroys your home and injures you or a loved one, it is severe and devastating." This maxim holds true whether the disaster rolls through downtown Atlanta or rural Lawrence County, Alabama. The difference is downtown Atlanta is more likely to qualify for Federal Individual Assistance than Lawrence County.**

**The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act sets forth the guidelines for requesting federal assistance. This Act is designed to work for disaster victims and not against them. Unfortunately, it was used against rural victims during a recent tornado outbreak in Alabama.**

**The truth is there is no thermometer that establishes a scalable threshold for who qualifies for Individual Assistance in the wake of a disaster. Earlier this year parts of Tennessee and Alabama were hit by the same outbreak of tornadoes, causing death and destruction in both states. However, as if a disaster recognizes state boundaries, the damaged parts of Tennessee qualified for Individual Assistance, but the damaged parts of**

**Alabama did not. I can tell you it was very difficult for Governor Riley to explain this denial of Individual Assistance to the rural Alabamians who lost loved ones and everything they owned in that disaster.**

**Rural areas need homeland security capabilities, training, and assistance just like their urban counterparts. They have the same responsibilities to safeguard lives and protect property. In many cases, rural areas have a limited ability to respond until a needed capability arrives from a better equipped urban area to assist. A self sufficient rural area is often the first line of defense to immediately containing an event or disaster before it escalates into something much larger and more destructive.**

**Additionally, homeland security capabilities in rural areas represent the surge capacity and increased capability we rely upon to assist in large scale disasters. Under the Emergency Management Assistance Compact thousands of Alabamians and pieces of homeland security equipment deployed from Alabama to both Louisiana and Mississippi to assist our neighbors in their response to Hurricane Katrina. As we meet here today, trained and properly equipped Alabamians are deployed to both Iowa and California to assist our fellow Americans with disasters in their states.**

**During Bob Riley's tenure as Governor of Alabama, which began in January 2003, state assets were requested to assist our local communities with the following events: 3 major hurricanes, 1 tropical storm, 371 tornadoes, 607 flood warnings, 1,464 hazardous material spills, 116 bomb threats, 22 ice storms and winter storm advisories, 91 incidents involving air and rail modes of transportation, 17 terrorist threats and /or hoaxes, 8 reported earthquakes, 2 virus outbreaks, and 1 dam failure. This list is far from exhaustive, and does not reflect the hundreds of events local governments and rural areas did not seek state assistance. This is an enormous workload for predominantly rural first responders, considering it does not reflect the routine police, fire, and other first responder duties performed on a daily basis.**

**As a final point, history teaches us that suspected terrorists are prone to planning, living, and training in rural areas. It is imperative rural law enforcement have the investigative tools and technology needed to combat terrorism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Please consider the following:**

**-The DC snipers murdered in Alabama before terrorizing and spreading panic in the National Capitol Region.**



**-Two of the 9-11 hijackers were detained for traffic violations in rural Marion County, Alabama before they participated in the deadly attacks that killed over 3000 of our fellow citizens.**

**-Hundreds of weapons, improvised explosive devices, and rounds of ammunition were confiscated and destroyed recently in parts of rural counties in northeast Alabama. These instruments of death were being stockpiled by domestic hate groups that still regrettably proliferate in rural America.**

**To ignore the need for a level playing field between urban and rural law enforcement officials and other first responders would be a grave mistake for the future safety and security of our country.**

**I close by stating we continue to make enormous progress in securing our country, but a great deal of work remains. Federal, state, and local authorities are collaborating better now than at any time in our nation's history. It is important to remember security for our citizens is not a sprint, but a marathon. Local, state, and federal efforts must be sustained for the long haul, and I worry many of our citizens do not have the same long view of history as our adversaries. The same**

**holds true for natural disasters. They have always been a part of the human experience, and will remain.**

**Thank you for the privilege of appearing before you today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.**

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