

**Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Government Reform  
Hearing on “Getting Ready for the ’06 Hurricane Season”**

**May 24, 2006**

Mr. Chairman, I am pleased that you are holding today’s timely hearing on our nation’s hurricane preparedness. Serious questions remain about whether the government is ready to handle another major disaster like Katrina. This week’s forecast of another active hurricane season underscored the importance of addressing the problems exposed by the failed response to Hurricane Katrina.

The House and Senate investigations into Katrina revealed that the failures of the federal response had two major causes. One cause was lack of attention and weak leadership from top officials at the White House and Department of Homeland Security. The other cause was that the government’s plans, organizational structure, and personnel were inadequate to provide the rapid and massive response that was needed.

We hope that the Administration has learned from Katrina that major disasters require all hands on deck and engagement by senior leadership. But I question whether the organizational and planning problems have been sufficiently addressed.

Since Katrina, Secretary Chertoff has stripped FEMA of its responsibility for preparedness, even though experts agree that preparedness and response are two sides of the same coin that should be handled by one agency. Senior posts at FEMA and DHS remain unfilled, in part because experienced emergency managers are unwilling to work in an organization they perceive as broken. And responsibility for medical response is still divided between HHS and DHS, while the National Disaster Medical System remains understaffed and undersupplied.

Some progress has been made, and the nation is better prepared for hurricane season than we were late last summer, when Katrina was bearing down on the Gulf Coast. But the response to Hurricane Katrina was such a massive failure – and such a profound betrayal of our government’s obligation to care for our most vulnerable citizens in their time of greatest need – that it is not enough for our government simply to be better prepared than it was for Katrina.

The American public deserves an effective, efficient, top-notch hurricane response system.

I thank the witnesses for appearing here today, and I look forward to hearing about how you have responded to the lessons learned from Katrina.