



United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Senator Susan M. Collins, Chairman

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**Opening Statement of
Senator Susan Collins**
Recovering from Hurricane Katrina: The Next Phase
September 14, 2005

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Today, the Committee begins an inquiry into the Hurricane Katrina disaster. I would like to thank my colleagues and our witnesses for their prompt cooperation on a matter of such great urgency.

In the months ahead, this Committee intends to conduct a thorough, deliberate, and fair review of the preparation for and response to this devastating hurricane – at all levels of government.

We will ask the hard questions about the adequacy of planning efforts for this long-predicted natural disaster. We will explore the coordination among local, state, and federal emergency management officials before and after the hurricane's landfall. And we will critically examine the legal structures and authorities that define who is in charge of assets that must be brought to bear in such a catastrophic event.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, America has worked hard and invested billions of dollars to create an emergency preparation and response structure that would bring local, state, and federal authorities together into one cohesive and effective unit. In its first major test since 9/11, however, this structure failed to meet our expectations.

At this point, we would have expected a sharp, crisp response to this terrible tragedy. Instead, we witnessed what appeared to be a sluggish initial response that was characterized by a confusing lack of unity of command, a lack of coordination among different levels of government, and a lack of communication – sometimes even an inability to communicate at all – among government entities, first responders, utilities, health care providers, and other emergency workers.

Some have said that these problems have been caused by the federal government's post-9/11 focus on terrorism. Our Committee will look at that issue, but I will tell you at the outset, I really doubt that is the problem. Much of our preparations for a terrorist attack are equally applicable whether the cause of the incident is a natural disaster, fire, or accident.

For example, if the levees in New Orleans were breached by a terrorist attack instead of a hurricane, we still would have faced very similar evacuation, rescue and recovery challenges.

Another issue we will examine is whether FEMA should be part of the Department of Homeland Security. Again, I will say at the outset that my inclination is that it should be part of DHS. Whether it is a terrorist attack or a natural disaster, FEMA plays a key role in the response. DHS includes offices that support preparedness at the state and local level as well as federal agencies like the Coast Guard that play critical roles in planning and response. Including FEMA as part of DHS should promote better coordination with these agencies.

Another question that is being debated is whether or not an outside commission should be formed to investigate Katrina. The answer to that question has no bearing on our work here.

Regardless of whether an outside commission is established, it is essential that Congress conduct an aggressive inquiry. We would be remiss if we ignored our clear responsibility to conduct oversight to identify why the preparation and initial response were so woefully inadequate. We must identify problems so that we can change the laws and institute reforms that only Congress has the power to implement.

The purpose of our work here is not simply to place blame. Such an inquiry would be unproductive and misguided. Without a single human error, Katrina still would have been a natural disaster on an order of magnitude rarely seen on earth. But our inquiry must lay bare the painful evidence of human errors that have added to the damage. We must learn the lessons from Katrina, so we can better protect our people the next time a disaster strikes.

In conducting this inquiry we are determined not to divert resources from the recovery efforts that are still at a critical stage. Ensuring that federal, state, local, and private emergency efforts have the resources and leadership needed must remain our first priority and our highest obligation.

In that spirit, our first hearing will focus on how we can best assist the victims of Katrina: the 450,000 displaced families, the newly unemployed, the shuttered small businesses, the overwhelmed school systems, the obliterated communities.

We have with us today witnesses who led with distinction when faced with natural disasters. We will ask their advice on what we can do now -- right now -- to assist and comfort the victims of Katrina, to stabilize the economy of the Gulf Coast, and to plan for the reconstruction.

I would like to close with a word of thanks. Despite the failures and shortfalls of the response, there have been many more acts of courage and compassion. Many first responders and medical providers, the Coast Guard, National Guard, active duty troops, private citizens and, yes, FEMA employees, have worked heroically and tirelessly. Neighbors have reached out to neighbors.

One incredible fact I learned when the Coast Guard briefed this Committee last week: Seventy percent of the Coast Guard employees based in the Gulf Coast who were heroically rescuing tens of thousands of people over the past two weeks had lost their own homes in Hurricane Katrina. Yet they carried on and did their job helping others.

And throughout our nation, Americans have done what they always do in times of crisis: they have opened their hearts, their wallets, and, in a great many cases, their homes. Katrina has raised serious questions about how our governments respond to catastrophic events – questions we intend to answer over the course of this investigation. But Katrina has also shown, once again, that the spirit and character of the American people gives our nation a resiliency to recover from any storm.

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