



United States Senate

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Senator Susan M. Collins

Opening Statement of Senator Susan M. Collins

Ranking Member, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Department of Homeland Security Budget

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and welcome back, Mr. Secretary.

The budget for homeland security presents a mixed picture. On the positive side, the eight percent increase in funding for the Department of Homeland Security stands as clear recognition of the vital importance of preventing and responding to terrorist attacks and preparing for and responding to natural disasters.

The nearly 50 percent increase in DHS budget authority since fiscal year 2003 is also notable. But we must not underestimate the daunting task that remains before us – or forget that state and local first responders are on the nation's front lines.

Homeland security depends on partnerships – across federal agencies, among levels of government, and with the private sector. Key to these effective partnerships are our first responders.

That is why I am extremely concerned about the large cuts in grant funding proposed in this budget. First-responder grants have been chronically under-funded since 2004, yet the new budget proposes only \$250 million for the State Homeland Security Grant program. That is a cut of more than 50 percent from the amount appropriated for fiscal year 2007. We must reverse this trend.

Communities rely heavily on State Homeland Security Grants for emergency planning, risk assessments, mutual-aid agreements, equipment, training, and exercises for first responders. Combined with the proposed reduction in minimum allocation, the minimum state grant level would fall to \$625,000 if the President's budget is accepted. That is less than what it costs Maine to staff its fusion center, employ personnel to coordinate statewide training and exercises, and ensure that it effectively implements the National Incident Management System.

We need a more robust level of minimum funding to ensure that all states are prepared in order to fortify our prevention and response capabilities as a nation.

Similarly, the proposed budget slashes grants for firefighters by \$362 million. It also "zeros out" funds for Metropolitan Medical Response System grants and the Commercial Equipment Direct Assistance Program. These are not arcane budget details. They are programs that provide Americans – whether they live in New York City, Connecticut suburbs, or Maine towns – with additional security.

Mr. Chairman, funding cuts of the magnitude proposed in the budget would be a blow to our nation's security.

In an effort to “offset” these cuts, the budget refers to a \$1 billion Public Safety Interoperable Communications grant program. However, these interoperability funds do nothing to supplant the cuts in grants for enhancing other preparedness capabilities.

It is also my understanding that the Department is considering awarding grants under this program solely to urban areas. Such a plan ignores the lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina. While the emergency communications needs of urban and metropolitan areas are certainly great, it is imperative that the Department use the \$1 billion interoperability grant program to help build a *national*, all-hazards emergency communications system.

I am also very disappointed that the budget fails to fund fully our nation’s port-security program. Members of this Committee worked hard on a bipartisan law to improve port security and authorized funding of \$400 million. Yet, the budget provides only \$210 million for grants under the SAFE Port Act – barely half the amount we authorized.

Another legislative accomplishment of the last Congress was enacting authority for the Secretary of Homeland Security to regulate security at the thousands of facilities that manufacture, store, or use potentially hazardous chemicals. The budget provides \$25 million to establish an office to exercise this new authority. I am pleased with the \$15 million increase, but considering the scope of the new mandate and the risks it addresses, I question whether this level of funding will be adequate.

The Administration deserves credit for increasing FEMA’s operational and administrative budget by \$101 million. This is a strong reinforcement and includes funding for an additional 275 personnel. Strong leadership combined with more resources should put FEMA on a sound footing.

The Administration also commits substantial resources to securing the border. The budget would increase the number of Border Patrol agents and proposes \$1 billion for border protection infrastructure and technology that should improve our ability to control our borders.

As we work to defend our southern border, however, we must not neglect our northern border or coasts. As we strengthen defenses to our south, we increase the appeal of other avenues of approach for our enemies. We know from the case of the Millennium Plot that the northern border is already attractive as a point of entry for our enemies. Our nation’s security demands a balanced approach to border protection.

The last concern I’ll mention here involves the most conspicuous heroes of the response to Hurricane Katrina – the men and women of the United States Coast Guard. The new budget request for the Coast Guard is only 1.2 percent higher than the amount enacted for FY 2007 – an increase that does not even match the rate of inflation and that slights the Coast Guard’s increasingly challenging missions and the aging of their sea and air assets. The Deepwater program has been poorly managed, but the urgent need for modern and effective assets remains.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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