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Good morning and thank you for that kind introduction.

It's great to be among friends. I've been an IAFF member for most of my life, and I am proud of the work this organization and you – its leaders and members – do on a daily basis.

Here in Washington, the year starts with the budget. That's why you're here.

And it's important that you make your voice heard. FEMA and our partners across the Administration use what we learn from our interaction with you and your colleagues on the ground. But Congress and others deserve to hear directly from you on the concerns and issues that impact first responders.

The President has proposed a \$9.7 billion FEMA budget that is the strongest FEMA has ever received. Much of this goes for state and local grants. In fact, nearly a quarter of FEMA's budget – roughly \$2.2 billion – will go to state and local grants. When all is said and done, just about 10% of our budget will go to FEMA for our operations – the rest is focused on our efforts on the ground.

Over the past five years FEMA and DHS have provided over \$2.5 billion in fire fighter grants. This is on top of the more than \$23.8 billion for state and local projects through our disaster grant programs.

While the bulk of our resources are focused on our efforts to help you and our fellow Americans on the ground, the budget also includes close to \$1 billion for FEMA. This includes an additional \$100 million this year for our continued efforts to strengthen ourselves as part of the New FEMA vision. In FY08 we focused new resources on our operational capabilities. In '09, we will strengthen our internal business processes while continuing these operational reforms.

In the two years since Katrina, we have truly made great strides in building “New FEMA.”

We are well on the way to transforming the quality of the assistance we are capable of providing to support you. FEMA is leaning further forward to plan for your needs and be ready to respond quickly. This approach is what we call “Engaged Partnership” and it is guiding our plans and our actions.

FEMA is improving our operational capabilities and our business processes, and we are already stronger and more nimble than we were two years ago.

We have made significant strides in all of FEMA’s major programs. Look at the results.

Since Katrina, FEMA has responded with you to more than 300 federally declared disasters. The California Fires saw our biggest response last year, but we were involved with tornadoes, floods and hurricanes. In each case the improvements at FEMA have been self evident. I am proud of these results.

FEMA’s activities in Southern California in support of state, tribal and local activities provides a real-life example of the New FEMA’s commitment to leaning further forward and to working in close coordination with our partners at every level.

We recognize that “all disasters are local.” The New FEMA does not mean that the federal government wants to step in or take over. FEMA is organizing to work with our partners to determine what your needs are and how we can best support you.

I’ve already mentioned the Fire Fighter Assistance Grants and the more than \$2.5 billion that we have provided to state and local fire departments. firegrantsupport.com has the details if you’re interested.

But it is more than money.

My old stomping ground – the US Fire Administration, now under Chief Cade – is involved in extensive research that will benefit emergency responder training. Research is underway in the areas of Health and Safety; Vehicle Safety; Firefighter Safety; and Civilian Life Safety.

USFA’s National Firefighter Academy, FEMA’s Emergency Management Institute in Maryland and our Center for Domestic Preparedness in Alabama provide extensive training programs that have helped to train thousands of first responders. There are on-line courses for your partners who can’t make it in person, and we are working to improve our relationships with state academies, universities and colleges to expand our support for local efforts that are more accessible to your colleagues at home.

We are working to develop voluntary credentialing standards for first responders who react across jurisdictions to insure that you know who is offering their assistance when a crisis hits. When I was chief in Miami-Dade during the Valu-jet crash, I had numerous folks show up at the scene and I had no idea who they were. This can be a valuable tool as we move forward.

And the National Response Framework lays out a clearer outline for our joint coordination in large-scale disasters.

In short, the New FEMA recognizes we are not in this alone – and I hope you know that, too.

Working together we can truly make a difference.

Together we can educate the public on their role during a disaster. Government – even with the Federal, tribal, State and local governments working perfectly in sync – is not the entire answer. All Americans need to be part of the emergency management process. Americans must understand and take responsibility for their role in disasters. We must continue to develop a culture of preparedness in America.

I want a better future – for my children and my grandchildren. I am dedicated to working hand-in-hand, day-by-day, with my partners at every level of government, in the private sector, in the non-profit sector and wherever I can find just one individual who wants to help those in need. I ask you to join me in this journey. Together we will make a difference.

Thank you, God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.