

**Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins
Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs**

Hurricane Katrina: Mississippi's Recovery

January 17, 2006

Today, the Committee continues its investigation into the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina. The focus of our tenth hearing is on the status of recovery and rebuilding efforts in the State of Mississippi. I want to thank Mississippi's Senators and Governor Barbour for their advocacy.

Two weeks after Katrina struck, I was among a group of Senators who toured this devastated region, in particular, the town of Pass Christian. The destruction was unimaginable. The suffering and deprivation were heartbreaking, but the courage and determination of the people to, as Governor

Barbour puts it, “build back better than ever,” were then, and continue to be, inspiring.

At the time of our tour, I said that our first priority and our highest obligation were to help the Gulf Coast recover from this unprecedented natural disaster. The cooperation and the candor of those we met back in September, and of those who have worked with us in developing this hearing, greatly aid this endeavor. We need to hear first-hand the experiences – the good, the bad, and the ugly – of those seeking federal assistance to rebuild their communities.

Today before this hearing, I toured this area again with the guidance of Robert Latham, your Director of the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency, and your gracious First Lady, Marsha Barbour. The hard truth remains that the devastation is still beyond comprehension: row upon

row of bare concrete slabs where neighborhoods once stood; wreckage washed up far inland; and bridges that once connected your communities still washed away. As I looked upon the mountains of debris, I realized that each contains all that is left of someone's beautiful home or thriving business.

It is perhaps understandable that much of America's focus has been on Louisiana, and especially New Orleans, considering the grievous damage its residents suffered, and our Committee will be going there this afternoon for a first-hand assessment of their situation.

But their loss in no way diminishes the magnitude of the tragedy you have endured, or the difficulties, frustrations, and uncertainties that continue to plague your lives. I know the Biloxi Sun Herald spoke for many when it expressed the fear

that this would become the “Invisible Coast,” in light of the flood in New Orleans.

I want to assure you that is not the case, so far as this Committee is concerned. Your losses are far too great to ignore, and your recovery is essential to the nation.

Back in Washington, our Committee already has conducted nine hearings on what happened in the Katrina catastrophe.

It is the mission of our Committee to understand the state of our country’s preparedness four years after 9/11 and three years after the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, and who, how, and why any responsible individuals and organizations fell short in responding to and managing this disaster.

Not so we can fix blame on anyone and then move on to the next crisis du jour, but rather so we can learn the lessons this catastrophe has to teach and take corrective actions so we can do a better job next time, whether in responding to another natural disaster or to a terrorist attack.

But beyond that vital purpose, it also is the business of this Committee to learn how this State and this region are progressing with their recovery and how the federal government can be an effective partner in this monumental undertaking.

Already, we have tried to be of assistance by sponsoring emergency legislation to provide for full federal reimbursement for the costs of removal of the unfathomable amounts of debris that choked your streets and your

landscape. But we well appreciate that the federal role is far greater than that and we want to know how you are doing and what you need, and what obstacles and barriers you are encountering as your recovery continues.

We also understand that for every demolished school or ruined hospital on the Coast, there is an over-burdened and over-stressed counterpart inland. A region that recently boasted of nearly full employment now has a double-digit unemployment rate. Vibrant communities that once were filled with homes and businesses now are vast areas of debris and desolation.

Your needs are great, and they are many. The Mississippi State Port here at Gulfport is still struggling to rebuild its destroyed warehousing so that it can move cargo efficiently. Your road and highways are still being repaired

and your seafood industry remains devastated. Coming from a maritime state, I know how crucial these are to your economy and your people. In a recent news story, I read of local family that strung Christmas lights on the tent they are still living in some four months after Katrina hit, a tent pitched in the yard of their demolished home.

The final report of the Governor's Commission on Recovery, Rebuilding, and Renewal lays out an ambitious and farsighted plan intended to revive your economy, to create new jobs, and to ensure that that family, and so many other families like it, will be in a real home for the Christmases to come.

During my two visits here, I have been struck, first and foremost, by the utter devastation Katrina brought to your beautiful region. Equally powerful, however, is the commitment of the people there to help each other overcome

the immediate crisis and to rebuild for the future. Working together, I know that the Gulf Coast will be better than ever.