

**Testimony of James H. Bassham**  
**Director, Tennessee Emergency Management Agency**  
**before the**  
**Senate Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery**  
**Thursday, July 17, 2008**

Madame Chairwoman and Distinguished Senators:

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery. Governor Phil Bredesen has asked that I convey his personal thanks for your interest in the State of Tennessee's perspective of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) performance during the Presidential Declared Disaster resulting from the series of tornadoes on February 5<sup>th</sup> of this year that took the lives of thirty-three Tennesseans.

I would like to brief you on the sequence of events that took place in Tennessee on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February and the resulting response and recovery efforts which officially ended on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008 when FEMA closed the Joint Field Office.

The morning of February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008, I was testifying before our State's joint legislative subcommittee on state and local government. I ended my comments by telling the Committee that the State was most likely in for a very rough night of weather and that they should be prepared to "*hunker*" down. The Tennessee State Emergency Management Operations Center in Nashville had been monitoring the severe weather as the system moved across Texas and Oklahoma before moving into Arkansas and Louisiana. The forecast from the National Weather Service gave us every reason to believe that Tennessee would be affected. By the afternoon of the 5<sup>th</sup>, the system was in Arkansas and was tracking towards Tennessee and Mississippi while increasing in strength. The Tennessee Emergency Management Agency has regional offices in Jackson, Tenn., Nashville, and Knoxville. Conference calls were conducted with each region, the National Weather Service, and County Emergency Managers in the regions to insure that all were alerted to and discuss the weather threat. This is a routine practice for Tennessee when threats appear imminent. Our State Emergency Operations

Center had increased staff to handle the expected weather related communications traffic, and the State on-call officer remained in Operations after the normal office hours in anticipation of the upcoming weather events.

At 5:48 p.m. the State Emergency Operations Center received confirmation from the Memphis/Shelby County Emergency Management Operations Center that a tornado had touched down in South Memphis. The state on-call officer notified me of the Shelby County weather event and at 6:30 p.m., I ordered the State Emergency Operations Center activated. In Tennessee, the activation of the State Emergency Operations Center declares a State of Emergency.

I responded to the Operations Center and notified Governor Bredesen's staff and Major General Gus Hargett, the Adjutant General. I then called Phil May, the FEMA Region IV Administrator in Atlanta, Ga., to brief him on the weather conditions and to alert him that the Operations Center was activated at a level three. Mr. May asked if I would like a FEMA liaison deployed, and one was in place within two hours. FEMA also provided a Federal Incident Response Support Team.

The Federal Incident Response Support Team arrived in Nashville on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February at 3:00 a.m., and they were immediately deployed to Macon County, our hardest hit county. Over the next forty-eight hours, the State responded to the needs of the local jurisdictions through local mutual aid and State resources. No out of State assistance was required. FEMA deployed a Federal Coordinating Official to begin the process of setting up a Joint Field Office, which was operational on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February. This was six days after the tornadoes. The preliminary damage assessment was far enough along that Governor Bredesen requested a Presidential Disaster be declared at 5:23 p.m. on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008. We were notified at 10:00 p.m. on February 7<sup>th</sup> that the President had declared five counties. This number would eventually increase to a total of 19 counties.

During the subsequent days, weeks and months, FEMA was a full partner with the State as we worked through the myriad of challenges associated with both public and individual assistance. The Joint Field Office performed admirably

under Gracia Szczech as disaster field offices were set up to serve our citizens. The Joint Field Office closed on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

FEMA responded rapidly with appropriate assets and worked with the State and local officials to achieve the very best outcomes under the circumstances. I have no negatives to report on FEMA's response and recovery.

I will say that interim housing became a problem when rental property was not available and manufactured housing appeared to be the only available option. The issue of acceptable levels of formaldehyde in the housing units became a contest of wills as FEMA, the Center for Disease Control, the U.S. Department of Health, along with TEMA and the Tennessee Department of Health and the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, were unable to agree on acceptable Formaldehyde levels in the mobile homes. Tennessee was forced to identify a threshold below which the State would accept the housing units. It was, and still is, Tennessee's view that acceptable formaldehyde levels should be a Federal responsibility as they own the housing units.

I have one other issue that I would like to surface for the benefit of the committee.

I am chairman of the Central United States Earthquake Consortium, which is comprised of the eight states primarily affected by the New Madrid Seismic Zone. These states are: Arkansas, Alabama, Kentucky, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Mississippi and Tennessee. FEMA has been funding a Catastrophic Planning Initiative for the past two years. This effort revolves around the New Madrid Seismic Zone. It is a grass roots initiative starting with local jurisdictions, then state and finally regional planning. I want to stress that this catastrophic planning effort is valuable not just for earthquake preparation, but transfers to any catastrophic event. On behalf of the eight Consortium states, I urge continued funding for FEMA to continue this worthy project.

On the larger issue of FEMA Response and Recovery to the 5 February tornadoes in Tennessee, while we hope not to require their assistance anytime soon, FEMA is always a welcome partner to the Volunteer state.

This concludes my formal statement to the subcommittee.

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