

Opening Statement
Rep. Charlie Melancon of LA
U.S. House Committee on Science
Hearing: NOAA Hurricane Prediction
October 7, 2005

As you all know, my district suffered catastrophic damage and tragic loss of life due to hurricane Katrina. It's hard to relate in words the situation that Katrina left behind. The challenges to rebuilding and putting South Louisiana back together again are complex and the progress is slow. The loss of life, livelihood, homes, and communities defies description.

But, the courage, resilience, and strength of Louisiana's citizens is also evident. We have taken a mighty blow from Mother Nature and we're stunned, but we're still standing. We are going to recover from this and restore our communities, but we have a long hard road ahead. The Federal Government must work with the state and local governments to rebuild our communities, our livelihoods and the natural and the man-made structures that protect us from these storms.

We've heard criticism of the government response at all levels. In the midst of all this finger-pointing, however, I think it is important that we highlight the many local officials who took care of their people when the network to support them collapsed. If not for the efforts of these heroes, many people would not have evacuated and many of those who did not evacuate would not have survived.

My constituents are not interested in partisan bickering or Monday-morning quarterbacking. They need their immediate needs addressed and they need help to rebuild their lives. As Federal officials, we need to ensure the Federal Government is ready to respond rapidly to future situations where citizens are victimized by natural or man-made disasters. State and local governments cannot be expected to provide sustained response and assistance from within a vast devastated area. The federal government is the only organization with resources to provide the type of emergency assistance our citizens need.

We can learn from some of the Federal agencies that did perform well – the National Weather Service and the U.S. Coast Guard are two examples.

The National Weather Service worked cooperatively with state and local officials and with the media to get information out to the public. Their forecasts were accurate, and their warnings were clear. Without these forecasts and warnings, and the lead time they provided, we would not have been able to evacuate as many people as we did and the loss of life would have been much greater. Their performance emphasizes the need for Congress to ensure that this agency stays adequately funded.

To the American people and my fellow Members on this Committee – thank you. You have reached out to me and my district these past days and weeks and your generosity has not gone unnoticed. Rest assured, with your help, Louisianians will survive; we will rebuild; and our state will be strong again.

On behalf of my constituents; thank you Dr. Mayfield, and the other employees of the Hurricane Center and the National Weather Service for your fine work. I am anxious to work with my colleagues on the Committee to ensure that NOAA has the resources it needs to continue to improve hurricane forecasting. Additionally, I would also want to ensure that NOAA's other branches have the resources they need to help us to rebuild our coastal wetlands and our fisheries.

Thank you, and I yield back my time.