

**Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Government Reform
Hearing on “The Need to Know: Information Sharing for Disaster Response”
March 30, 2006**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing to examine issues raised by the failed response to Hurricane Katrina. The report of the Select Committee on Hurricane Katrina identified widespread and serious problems with our nation’s disaster preparedness and response. The Government Reform Committee must take the next steps in finding solutions to these problems, so that the government can better help our citizens through the next disaster.

This hearing on how to improve information sharing during a disaster is a good first step for our Committee to take. I hope we can continue to work together on oversight of the Department of Homeland Security and other federal agencies to make sure that better communications procedures and technology are put into place.

Right now, across the river in Alexandria, admitted Al-Qaeda member Zacarias Moussaoui is on trial, facing the death penalty for his role in the 9/11 attacks. As we all now know, Mr. Moussaoui was in custody weeks before September 11. His attendance at flight school raised alarms among some experienced law enforcement and intelligence professionals about a possible hijacking plot. But as the 9/11 Commission documented, the government never pulled together the various threads of information that could have detected the 9/11 plot. Better information sharing was one of the key recommendations that the 9/11 Commission made.

Hurricane Katrina showed us that serious flaws remain in the government’s crisis prevention and response communications capabilities.

The Katrina investigation revealed that President Bush, Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff, and other top officials were unaware of the magnitude of the disaster facing New Orleans until Tuesday, August 30 – a day after the levees broke. They were unaware of this even though the first reports of levee breaches came as early as 8:00 a.m. on Monday, and the levee breaches were confirmed by late afternoon that day.

In fact, as late as two weeks after landfall, President Bush continued to insist that the levees had not breached until Tuesday and that there was a sense of relaxation at the White House on Monday night and Tuesday morning because he and other top officials believed that New Orleans had “dodged a bullet.”

This was an inexcusable failure of the most senior officials in our government to comprehend and act on urgent warnings and vital information.

The second problem causing a lack of information was technological. Katrina was such a powerful storm that it knocked out phone lines and radio towers throughout a three-state region, leaving local officials unable to communicate their needs to state and federal officials who had the resources to help. Some of this was unavoidable – any large enough disaster is bound to damage or destroy telecommunications infrastructure. But there are options, like satellite phones, that could provide redundancy and allow communications when the regular system is down. Yet these were not in place.

I understand that we invited officials from the Department of Homeland Security to testify today, but they declined the invitation. DHS clearly has a primary responsibility for

information sharing during disasters, and I hope that we will have another hearing where we can hear from representatives from DHS.

Thank you to all the witnesses for your appearance before us today.