



Hearing Summary

HEARING ON "FEMA PREPAREDNESS IN 2007 AND BEYOND"

Rep. Henry A. Waxman

Chairman, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

On Tuesday, July 31, 2007, the Committee held an oversight hearing on the Federal Emergency Management Agency's progress in restoring its capacity to effectively serve the public in times of crisis.

Witnesses at the hearing included the Administrator of FEMA, the Director of the Joint Staff for the National Guard Bureau, the Deputy Inspector General for the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General, the Director of the Oklahoma State Emergency Management Agency, the Director of the Office of National Capitol Region Coordination, the Director of Emergency Management for Johnston County, North Carolina, the Director of the District of Columbia Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency, the Director for Homeland Security and Justice Issues for the Government Accountability Office, and the Director of the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado, Boulder. At the hearing, the Committee examined the new National Response Framework being developed by FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security in response to the "lessons learned" from Hurricane Katrina and the process being used by the federal government to create it.

The "New FEMA". FEMA Administrator Paulison testified that the "New FEMA" is now prepared to respond to the next disaster. Other witnesses agreed that FEMA has taken some necessary, productive steps to address the failures demonstrated during the response to Hurricane Katrina; however, these witnesses questioned FEMA's preparedness for the next "catastrophic disaster" similar to Hurricane Katrina and raised concerns about the federal government's inadequate coordination with state and local officials and its continued failure to clearly define federal roles for disaster response.

Lack of Consultation. States and local officials have complained that FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security failed to consult adequately with the states about the new National Response Framework being developed in response to the "lessons learned" from Hurricane Katrina. The Director of the Oklahoma State Emergency Management Agency summed up this sentiment at the hearing by stating, "I've queried my colleagues at both the state and local level and realize that no one knows what information this document contains and we won't until we read it like everyone else in this room."

Lack of Clearly Defined Roles. A key issue in the response to Hurricane Katrina was the lack of clearly understood roles and responsibilities. Witnesses at the hearing raised concerns that the problem persists despite efforts to correct it. An example presented was the controversy surrounding two different federal positions recently created by the Department of Homeland Security: Federal Coordinating Officers and Principal Federal Officers. The Director for GAO's Homeland Security and Justice Issues stated, "There is still some question among state and local first responders about the need for both positions and how they will work together in disaster response."

Additional information, including Chairman Waxman's statement and copies of testimony, is available online at www.oversight.house.gov.