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Congressional Fire Services Institute
Board Meeting

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Introduction:

It is an honor to be here for my final meeting with the Congressional Fire Services Institute as FEMA's Administrator. I have had a long relationship with all of you through my time as President of the IAFC, as Administrator of USFA and now as the head of FEMA. I want to thank you for your sound counsel and strong support throughout this time.

Progress:

I'd like to talk a little about our progress in recent years and our plans for the future.

In the past three years, with the support and leadership of President Bush, Secretary Chertoff and our friends in Congress, FEMA has secured the resources we need to build a strong organization that will carry out the mission the American people have given us.

It begins with people. We have doubled the size of the organization, not just by putting bodies into slots, but by bringing in new, experienced leaders to fill key career positions. We reorganized our shops to focus on our new goals. We integrated the preparedness mission back into FEMA, have spread its message across the organization, and learned to live that mission day in and day out. We are expanding our regional operations, to become stronger in the field and closer to all of you.

Did you know when I took the reins at FEMA we had no full-time operational planners? Today we have them not just in Washington, but in many of our regions as well. On this strong foundation of good people, we began to rebuild the organization, in a fundamental and hopefully, lasting way.

Planning:

But assets are only useful if we know what to do with them. As president Truman also said, “You can always amend a big plan, but you can never expand a little one. I don’t believe in little plans. I believe in plans big enough to meet a situation which we can’t possibly foresee now.” A wise guy, that Truman.

The National Response Framework is that “big plan” we all look to together when planning and executing our actions and it has been battle tested in the floods across the Midwest and the Hurricanes we have already faced this year – particularly Gustav and Ike. The 2008 Disaster Housing Plan – highlighted by Housing Task Forces led by the states – provides guidance in housing disaster victims. The Disaster Housing Strategy will help us to develop this plan into a stronger and more robust system in the years to come. Rome wasn’t built in a day – and too often we have to house more people in a shorter time than ever lived in ancient Rome.

Results:

The result was improved performance so far during this year’s storms. Remember, we did not just plan for Ike. We had to make sure we were prepared for Ike without leaving those recovering from Gustav, Hanna, Fay, Edouard and Dolly behind. There was no “robbing Peter to pay Paul.” We had a plan that allowed us to respond to multiple events.

But let’s look at Ike. In the final 72 hours before the hurricane made landfall its expected path shifted from the Florida Keys to New Orleans to the Mexican border. As the old military saying goes, “when you have to be strong everywhere you end up being strong nowhere.” But this is where prior planning came in to place. We had teams and commodities stationed at key locations that we could shift to any of the potential impact areas.

Today, recovery efforts are underway that include providing aid to residents, disaster housing to those whose homes are unlivable, and other support that helps people get back on their feet. It is not a perfect system, but it is much improved.

Don’t take my word for it, though. Mark Merritt, President of James Lee Witt Associates, said. “Post-Katrina, you’re seeing a much more highly developed partnership between FEMA, state and locals.” “FEMA came through for Texans,” said Allison Castle, a spokeswoman for Texas Governor Rick Perry. “Federal capabilities to procure, deliver and monitor supplies were much better, despite the enormous difficulties, including destroyed bridges and roads filled with debris,” noted Senator Susan Collins.

Transition:

We are committed to making sure that FEMA continues this progress even as the transition begins. When Hurricane Season concludes, we will not have our normal moment for review and reflection. We will need to maintain our readiness while undergoing a transition of Administrations.

We have a robust transition plan in place for the change in Administration next January. The initial focus has been on filling the career deputy slots with experienced and qualified people who will be ready to “hold down the fort” until the next President chooses their leadership team for FEMA. I have named one of our career Regional Administrators, Nancy Ward, to serve as our Senior Career Transition Officer to help facilitate the transition for FEMA senior leadership and potentially serve as Acting Administrator in the event that no Administrator exists. She is already here in DC and ready to plan for this transition and to be ready to assume her duties.

We have also worked across FEMA’s components and Regions to develop simple, useful, and uniform means to transfer knowledge, experiences, and lessons learned to the new leadership. We will provide actionable guidance on the workings of critical functions such as the disaster declaration process, activation of the NRCC, grant processes and other activities that our stakeholders depend upon. We will not leave you standing alone during this transition.

Conclusion:

We’ve made great strides, and laid a strong foundation. Now we must build upon it to make FEMA what we all want it to be: the nation’s preeminent emergency management agency.

Thank you again for your support and for all that you do to make our jobs in the emergency management community a little better.

God bless you. And God bless the United States of America.