

Oral Statement of
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Before the
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

“Hearing on FEMA Trailers”

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Good morning Chairman Waxman, Representative Davis and members of the Committee.

As the Administrator of FEMA, I am here to assure you and the citizens of our nation that we are aware of the concerns regarding the presence of formaldehyde in FEMA travel trailers and we are taking responsible steps to address them. As my written testimony explains in greater detail, FEMA has been proactive in reviewing the situation, has recommended a wide range of actions to travel trailer residents that reduce health risks, and has been working with experts to better understand the health environment and to investigate additional short and long-term solutions.

The health and safety of residents has been and continues to be our primary concern.

Following most disasters, those displaced from their housing by a disaster are able to obtain or are provided with short-term, temporary housing just outside the impacted area. Then, within a short period, they return to their homes. With the immensity and size

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita this was not possible. Facing an area of devastation roughly the size of Great Britain, FEMA provided over 120,000 mobile homes and travel trailers to individuals and families throughout the Gulf – the largest emergency housing mission in our nation’s history.

Six months after their initial deployment, FEMA received the first complaint of formaldehyde-related odors. After a prompt review, FEMA replaced the unit just a few weeks later on March 19. Since that time FEMA has documented just over 200 complaints of strange odors including formaldehyde. Of those, 58 have been replaced because of formaldehyde concerns. Five additional formaldehyde complaints resulted in the occupants being moved to now available rental housing resources.

Yet whether the number of calls was 2 or 200, I am concerned with the potential health implications of formaldehyde in our travel trailers and want to better understand and address the issue. FEMA is working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the EPA, HHS, HUD, the DHS Office of Health Affairs, and with our industry partners to investigate the situation.

Formaldehyde is present in many household products, construction materials and is produced by tobacco smoke and gas cooking. Although ventilation and other actions reduces the levels, anecdotal experience, especially from physicians caring for residents of trailers, has raised questions about overall indoor air quality of travel trailers and the practicality of the ventilation advice, especially in the Gulf Coast region in the summer. As we have gained experience and knowledge, we have expanded our efforts to research the levels of formaldehyde in the units and their impact on the health of all residents.

Despite 30 years of research and reports by numerous federal agencies, there is no existing consensus on safe formaldehyde levels in residential dwellings. So again, we are consulting the experts. This June, DHS officials, including FEMA, began meeting with

CDC, the National Center for Environmental Health, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and the National Institute for Standards and Technology. Together, we are beginning both short and long-term investigations. In fact, FEMA and CDC are scheduled to begin phase one of the study in the Gulf Coast next week.

In the meantime, FEMA continues to take action through updated trailer purchase specifications, improved training of FEMA and medical staff who respond to complaints, and continued education and communications with residents. We have also increased our efforts to move residents out of temporary housing and into long-term housing solutions.

FEMA and the entire Department of Homeland Security are committed to ensuring that victims of disasters have a safe and healthy place to live during the recovery period.

The health and safety of the residents is my primary concern.

We are going to great lengths to insure that it is the concern of everyone involved in researching and addressing formaldehyde-based issues.

We will continue to evaluate, communicate and mitigate the potential risks of formaldehyde or any other safety issue in our temporary housing units. Together with our federal and private partners we will work to develop sound best practices for reducing formaldehyde exposure in FEMA provided temporary housing.

Thank you. I look forward to discussing FEMA's recovery efforts with the committee.