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Chairman Price, Ranking Member Rogers, and Members of the Committee, my name is Ross Ashley, and I serve as the Assistant Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Grant Programs Directorate within the Department of Homeland Security. It is my pleasure to join my colleagues here today to discuss the Department's progress on interoperable communications. My goal is to provide information on several Department programs designed to assist State and local governments in improving the interoperability of public safety communications.

As you are aware, FEMA is responsible for supporting the Department's broader efforts to assist State, local, tribal, and territorial authorities in preventing, deterring, and responding to natural disasters, terrorist acts and other hazards. FEMA interacts directly with State and local jurisdictions and provides a broad array of support to America's State, Tribal, territorial, and local governments. FEMA support includes grants, coordinated training, exercises, equipment acquisition, and technical assistance. These grant programs were initiated in 1998, and currently provide funds to all 50 States, the District of Columbia, the territories, high-risk Urban Areas, public safety entities, non-governmental and academic institutions, and the private sector.

Progress Toward Interoperability

From fiscal year (FY) 2003 through FY 2008, the Department has awarded more than \$3.7 billion for communications interoperability initiatives. The Public Safety Interoperable Communications Grant Program (PSIC) we are administering on behalf of the Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) is providing nearly \$1 billion in grants to State and local communities. This partnership between NTIA and DHS is a great success story; enabling expertise at NTIA to draw upon our longstanding relationships with State, local and tribal governments. The goal of the PSIC grant program is to offer public safety agencies the opportunity to achieve meaningful and measurable improvements to the state of public safety communication interoperability.

Congress also created the Interoperable Emergency Communications Grant Program (IECGP) to provide important tools to drive measurable improvement in interoperability consistent with the initiatives of the National Emergency Communications Plan (NECP). Funded at \$50 million for FY 2008, and an additional \$50 million for FY 2009, FEMA GPD administers this program, while OEC provides policy guidance.

Initiatives supporting communications interoperability remain the largest category of expenditure within the Homeland Security Grant Program. Current reporting shows \$3.2 billion from the Homeland Security Grant Program is committed to interoperable communications projects.

Beginning in FY 2006, under the State Homeland Security Program, States were required to develop Statewide Communication Interoperability Plans (SCIPs). These plans were under development at the time Congress authorized the PSIC program, enabling us to

require investments made under PSIC to address gaps identified in the SCIPs. We now have in place, for the first time, 56 State and territory plans.

Funds Availability

The Department shares the concerns of our state and local partners with respect to funds availability. Through IECGP, states received FY 2008 grant awards last fall and these funds have been released to all states. PSIC grant program funds, awarded in September 2007, were delayed until each state and territory's required SCIP was approved by the Department's Office of Emergency Communications. All of these plans were approved in Spring 2008. As of today, all states have full access to PSIC grant funds and have begun obligating, expending and drawing down funds. The most significant reason for delay in the draw down of PSIC funds is Environmental and Historic Preservation review required under Federal law, including but not limited to, the National Environmental Policy Act. The nature of the PSIC program and the need for fixed equipment installation requires a high degree of environmental scrutiny. The Department of Commerce initiated a programmatic environmental assessment for the PSIC grant program which was published in the Federal Register on February 19, 2009, and is subject to a 30-day public comment period. We expect Commerce's Programmatic Environmental Assessment to be finalized this spring. Once finalized, we believe that most PSIC investments will be cleared from further environmental review and be expedited. This potentially allows hundreds of millions of dollars of PSIC grant funds to be drawn down and expended over the summer and fall.

Progress Made

As you know, the Department last summer provided to Congress the NECP, developed in collaboration with our state, local, tribal non-governmental and private sector partners. This plan provides a road map towards improving interoperable communications at all levels of government and provides us the ability to focus grant funded spending towards a common National goal.

We have learned through our partnership with state and local emergency responders that addressing interoperable communications is about more than simply purchasing equipment. In December, 2006 the SAFECOM program at DHS completed a comprehensive National Baseline assessment of thousands of state and local emergency response agencies. In our analysis of this and other assessments, we have seen that interoperable communications equipment is only as effective as the governance structures, planning, operating procedures, and training programs within which it is used. Our specific findings include:

Governance—Areas with mature governance structures have advanced further in implementing shared systems/solutions that facilitate regional communications. Regionalized strategic plans are largely not in place and should be developed for communications interoperability with careful consideration for how investments can be shared across the region.

Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)—For many of the urban areas, planning assistance provided the first formal, region-wide communications interoperability SOPs. Additional steps should be taken to ensure that these procedures (as well as those outlined in the National Incident Management System) are fully instituted at the command and responder levels.

Usage—The proficiency in the use of communications interoperability equipment and accompanying procedures varies by the types of equipment used and is increasingly complex as additional agencies are included in response efforts. In addition, almost no region had completed a communications-focused exercise before the DHS validation exercise, which meant that the areas had no specific practice using their interoperable communications capabilities in a region-wide context.

The FY 2009 IECGP provides governance, planning, training and exercise, and equipment funding to states, territories, and local and tribal governments to carry out initiatives to improve interoperable emergency communications. This includes communications in collective response to natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and other man-made disasters. Consistent with legislative authorities, all proposed IECGP activities must be integral to interoperable emergency communications and must be aligned with the goals, objectives, and initiatives identified in the grantee’s approved SCIP. The IECGP also advances DHS near-term priorities deemed critical to improving interoperable emergency communications and is consistent with the goals and objectives of the NECP. For FY 2009, two priority issues are identified as critical for advancing interoperable emergency communications in alignment with the criteria established for the SCIP process:

- 1) Gaps in Leadership, Governance, and Common Operational Planning and Protocols; and
- 2) Emergency Responder Skills and Capabilities Development Through Training and Exercises.

Real Progress

FEMA’s grant programs are yielding positive, real-world results. For example, Mr. Chairman, the state of North Carolina has planned an expansion of the state’s Voice Interoperability Project for Emergency Responders (VIPER). This \$25 million investment enables many of North Carolina’s 101 jurisdictions to connect to and use a single, uniform communications system.

Other examples include New York City’s expansion of its communications capabilities within its subway and other subterranean environments. This \$32 million system provides law enforcement, fire service and federal and state incident response personnel with a shared, UHF communications system facilitating communication in the City’s vast underground infrastructure.

Illinois is using nearly \$43 million in PSIC funds to link existing VHF, UHF and 800 MHz legacy systems to a statewide platform called STARCOM 21. The investment supports 12 regional projects in areas at high risk of natural disaster or terrorism. Collectively, these local projects provide statewide interoperability to over 100 public safety agencies protecting more than 11 million Illinois residents.

As we strive to develop more effective grant programs, DHS initiatives like the NECP, and strategic planning initiatives, such as the SCIPs, have provided critical data enabling us to target our grant investments towards documented gaps in our communications infrastructure and governance. We also recognize each state has particular needs and is at a different level of maturity in its interoperable communications systems. Therefore, we must ensure our grant programs challenge states to invest their grant dollars in initiatives that provide the greatest opportunity to move each state forward. For example, IECGP, while focusing on planning governance, training and exercises, also allows the flexibility for states that have addressed their planning and training needs to invest in communications equipment.

FEMA's Disaster Emergency Communications

The Homeland Security Appropriations Act of 2007 assigned responsibilities for emergency communications to the DHS Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The primary difference between the roles of the OEC and those of FEMA is that OEC performs strategic-level planning, policy development, outreach, and technical assistance for day-to-day public safety usage while FEMA performs tactical and operational planning and communications support for disasters.

FEMA's Disaster Emergency Communications Division (DEC) helps integrate and coordinate Federal Government disaster emergency communications services and capabilities at the national, regional, and local levels. FEMA DEC assists in the development of emergency communications plans and procedures for Regions and States; supports standards and technical advancements to improve communications; and conducts training, tests, and exercises of emergency communications capabilities and procedures. FEMA DEC also provides an integration and coordination point for federal agencies that provide disaster communications capabilities and support during incidents.

DEC is responsible for providing the means and method of transmitting and receiving voice, data, and video messages, information, and images critical to the successful management of a disaster incident where communications infrastructure has been negatively impacted or lost. DEC must be integrated at all levels of government to effectively serve as the backbone of emergency response operations.

More specifically, DEC is responsible for:

- Ensuring operable and interoperable communications are available in a disaster.

- Providing voice, video, and data communications for responders and Federal partners.
- Supporting emergency management across the entire disaster management lifecycle—preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation.

Although OEC and DEC support distinct but complementary missions, the two components coordinate very closely.

- FEMA is working closely with OEC to identify critical milestones needed to implement the goals in the NECP. The NECP requires the demonstration of response-level emergency communications capabilities by all jurisdictions. FEMA continues to coordinate milestone actions with OEC.
- FEMA is coordinating the development of State DEC Operational Plans through the Regional Emergency Communications Coordination Working Groups (RECCWG), established as a focal point for coordinating disaster emergency communications activities in the FEMA Regions. The State DEC Operational Plans provide an integrated Federal, State, local, and Tribal approach to ensuring effective emergency communications coordination prior to and immediately following an incident. In developing these plans, FEMA uses OEC's Statewide Communication Interoperability Plans (SCIP) and its Tactical Interoperable Communications Plan (TICP) to identify State and local emergency communications requirements and strategies to improve response capabilities.
- OEC participates in FEMA's RECCWG meetings.
- FEMA is an active participant in the OEC-led Emergency Communications Preparedness Center (ECPC) working group meetings which provide an opportunity to strengthen interoperability among Federal responders.
- FEMA invited OEC Director Chris Essid, to participate in the FEMA Regional DEC Coordinator Summit which occurred on March 11-12, 2009.

FEMA DEC also has a distinct tactical disaster emergency communications role, carried out as part of the Mobile Emergency Response Support (MERS) mission. MERS provides mobile telecommunications capabilities and life, logistics, operational and power generation support required for the on-site management of disaster response activities. MERS provides support in three broad categories:

- Operations - Mobile Emergency Operations Centers, quick reaction support, disaster preparedness (hazardous materials) officers and MERS security officers.
- Communications - satellite, multiple radio vans, high frequency line-of-sight microwave, land mobile radios, voice, video and data capabilities, and wide area interoperability.
- Logistics - fuel, water, HVAC, life support, transportation, and power.

Staged in six strategic locations, Bothell, Washington; Denver, Colorado; Maynard, Massachusetts; Denton, Texas; Thomasville, Georgia; and Frederick, Maryland, MERS detachments can immediately deploy mobile emergency communications teams and

response vehicles and can concurrently support a large Joint Field Office (JFO) and multiple field operating sites within a disaster area.

FEMA MERS maintains and deploys for disaster duty, specialized mobile emergency Incident Response Vehicles (IRV) that provide FEMA's capability to provide state-of-the-art satellite, land mobile radio, line-of-sight (LOS) systems and situational video services for response officials. MERS also maintains and deploys Mobile Emergency Operations Vehicle (MEOVs). These units are self-contained disaster support vehicles with critical power generation and satellite communications that provide highly effective mobile office support to austere locations that lack infrastructure. The units vary in size and provide support for Incident Command Posts, Initial Operating Facilities and/or a JFO. MEOVs are integrated communications and operations platforms that also have served as Disaster Recovery Centers for rapid support to disaster-affected communities.

Approximately 5 IRVs and 16 large and small-scale MEOVs provide mobile emergency operations and telecommunications support including:

- Stand-alone High Frequency Radios and LOS Microwave units in each detachment
- Heating, ventilation and air conditioning sets that generate enough BTUs for a 16,000 square foot building
- Several truck-mounted generators, ranging from 20 to 400 kilowatts, for power generation and distribution for several large facilities

MERS detachments can also transport and distribute fuel and water, and through a reverse osmosis purification unit, make brackish and salt water safe and drinkable.

Current MERS initiatives include:

- Focusing on improving certain high-tech services, such as Internet protocol, multimedia gateway systems, greater broadband access, and next-generation mobile high-speed data.
- Deploying new multi-purpose deployable incident response communications vehicles to integrate state-of-the-art technologies into regional operations.

Recent MERS support and response to disaster areas include the recent, winter storm in Kentucky:

- Established mobile command posts in four Kentucky locations, including the National Guard Readiness Center in Frankfort, allowing Guard units to assist with command and control by providing voice, video and data capabilities. Three additional units were deployed to Guard armories in Western Kentucky.
- Erected four portable Land Mobile Radio towers (LMR), deployed into Caldwell, Hopkins, Webster and Graysen Counties in Western Kentucky that allowed the

- Supplied hand-held radios to Kentucky National Guard units to facilitate the distribution of commodities

Hurricanes Ike and Gustav, October 2008:

- Provided emergency communications support to Galveston
- Repaired main repeater in Houston Reliance Center to support Texas Highway Patrol communications
- Provided command and control support for Houma, Louisiana
- Provided communications support to Louisiana State Police and Terrebonne Parish

The MERS capability enhanced overall interoperability during each of these disaster events. We appreciate the Committee's support for the MERS program and the critical role it plays in supporting disaster response and public safety.

Conclusion

Interoperable communications remains a priority issue for the Administration, for DHS, and for our NTIA partners. The Department remains committed to improving interoperable communications capabilities in every state to ensure that our Nation's first responders have the ability to communicate when the next disaster strikes. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. Thank you for having me today. I am happy to address any questions that you and the Members of the Committee may have.