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A Declaration of Inter-Dependence

Introduction

Good morning and thank you for that kind introduction.

I'd like to begin by sharing some familiar words with you.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

In the Declaration of Independence, the founders set forth the role of government in this statement.

These are the very rights that we in this room are pledged to protect. And at their basic level, they are what FEMA is working to secure.

We are dedicated to saving Life – by planning for disasters, protecting the nation through mitigating efforts, and responding when needed.

We are dedicated to preserving Liberty – by helping secure essential services before, during and after disasters strike and by fulfilling our respective governmental roles to preserve our ability to protect our fellow citizens.

And we are dedicated to the Pursuit of Happiness – by emphasizing the importance of preparedness and by assisting individuals and communities as they rebuild and recover following disasters that exceed their capacities.

The founders did not do it alone. They banded the colonies together to secure the blessings of liberty for themselves and their posterity. So, too, must we work together to

provide emergency management to a modern nation. None of us can nor should do it alone. It took more than 100 years, two efforts at forming a national government, and a civil war to gain that vision.

And so, let me present to you my Declaration of Inter-Dependence.

New Team, New Relationships

When I was confirmed last year in my position at FEMA, I committed FEMA's leadership both to building a stronger organization and to building strong ties with our partners inside and outside of government.

At FEMA, we have built a stronger team. I filled all 10 of the Regional Administrator positions with experienced leaders: men and women with decades of experience from a broad spectrum of the emergency management community. From a 26 year veteran of the state police in Ed Buikema, to Nancy Ward here in Region IX, the former Chief of the Disaster Assistance Branch and Deputy State Coordinating Officer for the California Office of Emergency Services, to – yes – a former Fire Chief in Dick Hainje, we have professionals that you all know and respect leading the regions.

We have also built an experienced team in Washington. Our Deputy Administrator, Harvey Johnson, has decades of Emergency Management experience from his time in the Coast Guard. This year we brought on to head our Logistics Management in Eric Smith, who comes to us from the Defense Logistics Agency – the recognized leader in the field. Our new Deputy Administrator for Preparedness comes from the States, where Dennis Schrader served as the Homeland Security advisor to Maryland's governor.

We are listening to new voices: with a disability coordinator, a small state and rural advocate and, just coming on board last month: our full-time law enforcement advisor, Dick Dinse. We have even borrowed executives from top companies to provide us with their view on how to introduce private sector best practices inside FEMA. We believe UPS, for example, knows a thing or two about moving commodities efficiently and effectively. Our Logistics Directorate is leveraging that expertise through our loaned executive program, and today a leader from UPS is working within FEMA to help us learn from their best practices.

Listing all the leaders who've joined our team could take more time than we have. But I don't have to do this; because these men and women are making themselves known to you on a daily basis. I have said frequently that the worst time to build relationships is during a disaster. When you call for assistance from FEMA, you will know the person you are calling.

And we will be ready to answer that call. In the two years since Katrina, we have truly made great strides in building “New FEMA.”

When I say that, I want to make a couple of things crystal clear. Dedicated men and women have been part of FEMA’s history and have done heroic work through good times and bad. But they have often done so with scarce resources and support. That has been true for every administration since FEMA was formed. It was a small agency with a very small base budget, but with an enormous mission. No honest reflection on FEMA’s past can fail to recognize that problem.

New FEMA is about changing that. We are already well on the way to doubling FEMA’s permanent staffing level. We are well on the way to almost doubling FEMA’s base budget. We are well on the way to transforming the quality of the assistance we are capable of providing to support you. FEMA will no longer wait for you to call before we consider our options. Today, FEMA is leaning further forward to plan for your needs and be ready to respond quickly. This approach is what we call “Engaged Partnership” and it is guiding our plans and our actions.

New FEMA: The Results Are Evident

FEMA is improving our operational capabilities and our business processes, and we are already stronger and more nimble than we were two years ago.

We have made significant strides in all of FEMA’s major programs. Nearly every week, I speak somewhere in the country or on Capitol Hill about reforms and improvements we have initiated. But in the interest of time, let’s consider the results to date.

Since Katrina, FEMA has responded with you to more than 300 federally declared disasters. The California Fires saw our biggest response this year, but we’ve been involved in recent months with tornadoes, floods and hurricanes. And in each case the improvements at FEMA have been self evident and I am proud of these results.

FEMA’s activities in Southern California in support of state, tribal and local activities provides a real-life example of the New FEMA’s commitment to leaning further forward and to working in close coordination with our partners at every level.

Even before the formal request for assistance came in, FEMA began planning for potential actions. Our regional staff were in touch with officials on the ground. We began considering what supplies would be needed, where they were located and how we could get them to the places they would do the most good. We put our response teams on

stand-by and made sure there would be no delay between a Presidential declaration and our readiness to act. And we reached out to our federal partners – agencies like the Small Business Administration, the Department of Defense, the Corps of Engineers and others – to make sure that, if called upon to act, we were ready to move forward together as a team.

The result: when Gov. Schwarzenegger sent in his formal request for a disaster declaration in the middle of the night, we were there to review it and send it to the White House. And when the President signed the declaration that very night, we began to move.

Within hours of the signed declaration FEMA was on the ground. There was a FEMA liaison in the state's operation center. Staff scouted and secured locations to use in Southern California. We began deploying supplies from our facility in Northern California. Secretary Chertoff and I personally flew to the scene. At the largest shelter – Qualcomm Stadium – more than 200 FEMA employees began registering residents for assistance in multiple languages. I was particularly pleased to hear California's Senator, Barbara Boxer, recognize: "The important difference between FEMA during Katrina and now is that they have actually learned to bring people together as a team."

The next week I returned to California – and this time I was joined by President Bush and Governor Schwarzenegger. The Governor was pleased with our teamwork, noting: "The cooperation that we have seen from our President and from his administration has been absolutely fantastic. We asked for an Emergency Declaration, and we got it within 24 hours. Then when we saw the fires spreading and becoming a major disaster, we asked for a Major Disaster Declaration, and we got it, again within 24 hours. And that of course means a lot, because it provides millions of dollars in federal aid and loans to individuals, families, and businesses."

We should be and will be judged not only on FEMA's performance before, during and after an event, but also on how well we work with our partners across government and in the private and non-profit sectors.

This is what we mean by "engaged partnerships." Today we are committed to truly working hand-in-hand with you and your colleagues on the ground.

We recognize that "all disasters are local." The New FEMA does not mean that the federal government wants to step in or take over. The first response is always the work of tribal, state and local government. But the old paradigm of making our own plans and then executing them only after local and State governments are completely overwhelmed does not work. Instead, we need a robust, cooperative relationship among all participants so that we understand your vulnerabilities, risks and requirements.

In the past, much of the discussion in Washington and in state legislatures was based on a simple – but faulty – assumption: that FEMA was limited in its options to support state and local governments. People asked us whether resources should only focus on preparedness or response. There was a false assumption that FEMA was simply the purveyor of blue tarps and ice. There was a belief that FEMA played only one role and provided only one answer – and that this answer would always be the same. This thinking represents a “tyranny of false choices.”

FEMA is organizing to work with our partners to determine what your needs are and how we can best support you. Sometimes the answer is not money, it is knowledge.

Our new Gap Analysis program is a prime example. This year working, with many of you, we initiated vulnerability assessments in the coastal States most prone to hurricanes. We have learned much from this effort. The result: FEMA and the states knew which Federal resources would be most necessary to support any given State during a hurricane. With this initial analysis in place, we put plans in place on a state-by-state basis. Was it perfect? Far from it – but it was a good start, and we intend to refine and extend the process next year. There is a truism, however, in emergency management planning: one size does not fit all. When faced with the false choice of ‘is FEMA allocating resources to provide for debris removal or evacuation assistance’ the new answer is – as it should be – it depends what that State needs most.

This also reflects how the focus of the new National Preparedness Directorate is permeating throughout FEMA. The GAP analysis reveals how we are planning for our future. When we know what is needed, we can develop and implement improved mitigation activities, plan our disaster operations and logistical needs, and be ready with the right type and amount of resources to assist in the recovery following an event. We are becoming a New, integrated, FEMA.

But FEMA’s improved plans and operations, no matter how closely aligned with State and local plans, will not be sufficient if the men and women on the ground aren’t prepared as well.

FEMA is now managing many of the Homeland Security grant programs that provide you with the resources needed to make improvements at home. From firefighter grants to competitive training grant programs to Urban Area Security Initiative, we know that getting you additional support, and in a timely manner, means that you will be able to support exercise, planning and training programs and be better prepared to respond to disasters in your communities.

The New FEMA recognizes we are not in this alone – and I hope you know that, too.

How You Can Be A Part of the Future

That is what I am asking you to do today. Be a partner in developing an enhanced emergency management system that will guide this nation's response into the 21st Century.

I am not asking you to pledge your lives, fortunes and sacred honor as those signers of the Declaration did in 1776. But I am asking you to join us in working together to protect America in times of need.

Working together we can truly make a difference.

We can make sure that during the next catastrophic event, the national framework is not on the shelf while people execute their own plans. Rather, we can develop and implement an integrated response system where all participants at all levels of government, private sector and nongovernmental organizations understand their role.

Together we can educate the public on their role during a disaster. Government – even with the Federal, tribal, State and local governments working perfectly in sync – is not the entire answer. All Americans need to be part of the emergency management process. Americans must understand and take responsibility for their role in disasters. We must continue to develop a culture of preparedness in America.

I want a better future – for my children and my grandchildren. I am dedicated to working hand-in-hand, day-by-day, with my partners at every level of government, in the private sector, in the non-profit sector and wherever I can find just one individual who wants to help those in need. I ask you to join me in this journey. Together we will make a difference.

Thank you, God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.