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Introduction

Thank you for that kind introduction. It was so positive; it took me a minute to realize you were talking about me. You clearly don't work for the media.

What a difference a year makes.

A year ago I stood before you and spoke of what we needed to do if FEMA was truly going to lead as the nation's Preeminent Emergency Management Agency.

I am here to report that we have made substantial progress.

Today, I stand before you as the Administrator of a New FEMA because of the hard work by many dedicated and talented people.

As the great coach Vince Lombardi said, "The dictionary is the only place that success comes before work. Hard work is the price we must pay for success."

I am especially proud of the men and women who work at FEMA. They have put their hearts and souls into rebuilding an organization that is fast becoming the Nation's Preeminent Emergency Management and Preparedness Agency—which is one of the most important changes.

Under the New FEMA, our vision is focused as much on preparedness as it is on emergency management.

We have not done this alone. Rather, we have reached out to many of you as partners to best understand how to build a more responsive and nimble emergency management and preparedness system that will serve all Americans.

And, I sincerely appreciate how warmly and professionally that we have been received by your staffs—thank you on behalf of all our employees. You have given us some terrific feedback that I will speak about shortly.

I'd like to talk about what's different about FEMA and how we are approaching the 2007 Hurricane season. This includes understanding how prepared all hurricane-prone states are this season.

Then, I'd like to speak briefly to what we have done internally at FEMA based on new areas of emphasis and strengthening our capabilities.

I'll wrap up my remarks with a discussion about the policy framework for strengthening the federal response system and our intention to lean further forward to coordinate federal capabilities.

2007 – Focusing Broadly and Understanding Requirements

FEMA has made a conscious effort to focus broadly on all 11 hurricane-prone states and territories to better prepare for the 2007 Hurricane Season.

The relatively light 2006 season allowed us time to establish our bearings and focus on those action items that will raise the level of preparedness across the entire continuum of the emergency management spectrum. And with early projections that show a busier 2007 season, this effort could not have come at a better time.

To do this, FEMA is using a gap-analysis tool, initially in each of the hurricane-prone states to determine where our assistance might be most effective. This assessment tool—developed in partnership with New York Emergency Management—is serving as the basis for better understanding vulnerabilities in a more consistent manner.

Today, FEMA is working closely with each of the 11 state emergency management communities in hurricane prone states using a consistent set of measures and tools to evaluate strengths and vulnerabilities.

We have people on the ground at this very minute conducting these analyses with your people. So, not only have we improved our ability to respond, we also will have a better understanding of what type of response and supplies may be needed for a particular area following a disaster.

This will allow us to better tailor our response. Knowledge is power—and we will have the facts to improve our response.

This year, we have placed additional focus on areas that previous lessons learned revealed insufficient. For example, we have made plans and preparations to deal with critical issues such as People with Disabilities and Pets, and have begun building better systems to coordinate with our partners in the private sector.

In addition, we are leveraging the power of modeling to more accurately understand the potential impacts of disasters, evaluate community needs, and improve our readiness to respond.

In short, the entire emergency management system will be more informed than ever before.

The New FEMA is also committed to listening to new voices in order to address our expanded focus. The new organizational structure at FEMA includes a senior **Disability Advisor, Small and Rural State Advisor, Law Enforcement Advisor and a National Advisory Council** to make sure we are hearing from these important communities on relevant issues of significance.

So, by focusing broadly, engaging with hurricane-prone states and understanding their vulnerabilities, and attending to new voices, I believe we are in a much stronger position than ever to respond.

Strengthening FEMA's Capabilities

Responding to the many lessons emerging from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, FEMA has invested heavily to improve our capabilities in several areas to better prepare for and respond to disasters.

These include: communications and disaster operations; disaster assistance and reducing the potential for waste, fraud and abuse; logistics management; and operational planning and continuity. But to make these changes we also needed the right people.

To make these changes and move our vision for a New FEMA forward, we have been fortunate to recruit some extremely qualified people throughout the agency. In fact, last week I swore in our tenth, full-time Regional Administrator. This is the first time in recent memory that all 10 of these posts have been filled.

We did not just plug anyone into these jobs. Each of these leaders has decades of experience in emergency management, are leaders in the field and bring strong leadership and credibility to their job.

I am happy to report that we are at 90% staffing for the first time in years. And, I am committed to reaching 95% by the start of hurricane season. Last year, I was criticized for not reaching this goal—but I have reason to be optimistic. Don't forget, we lost 500 people from FEMA following Katrina.

So, what have we accomplished in the past year?

First: Communications and disaster operations.

We've made major technological and systematic improvements to provide us with better, on-the-ground, real-time communications. The worst time to build relationships is during a disaster.

FEMA has developed systems to get information out to the public faster and with greater redundancies. More importantly, we are working aggressively at the HQ and Regional Administrator level to improve communications with tribal, state and local leaders now.

This includes the many new stakeholders such as the law enforcement community. You can also expect to see FEMA operations personnel in your emergency operations centers much sooner that you have in recent years.

This will improve our awareness and visibility of state requirements. Finally, we have developed significantly more pre-scripted mission assignments that allow us to leverage the capabilities of our federal partners in responding to incidents.

Second: Disaster assistance and reducing the potential for waste, fraud and abuse.

We have enhanced our ability to register up to 200,000 disaster victims each day, and we now have the capacity to inspect up to 20,000 homes per day. We have enough provisions to feed one million people for a week—and contracts with the Defense Logistics Agency to re-supply if necessary.

But, we can't provide assistance if you aren't registered in our system. So, we also have mobile registration units available if necessary to proceed where victims may be if they can't get to a phone, to an internet connection, or to a temporary shelter. We also have implemented numerous reforms using new technologies and vendors to help verify the identity of applicants and confirm their eligibility as residents in disaster areas. Today, if you say your house was damaged in an event, we can actually confirm that you lived there.

Third: Logistics.

For aid to be effective, we must be able to get what we need, where we need it, when we need it. With additional stockpiles in place, better supply line management systems, improved planning for major events—including mass evacuations—and near real-time tracking of trucks on the road, we are ready to answer the call to deliver the supplies that the states request.

And Fourth: Operational planning and continuity.

FEMA has recently hired operational planners to continue to build this core competency. Governments must be ready to provide essential functions and services to its citizens during times of crisis. FEMA plays a central role in the planning and preparation of insuring the continuity of operations during a national disaster—especially through our increasingly robust training programs and exercises.

A Policy Framework

The National Incident Management System and the National Response Plan are undergoing revision and serve as the critical policy framework to align and update FEMA's policies and our collective emergency management and preparedness efforts.

NIMS was developed so responders from different jurisdictions and disciplines can work together better to respond to natural disasters and emergencies, including acts of terrorism. NIMS benefits include a unified approach to incident management; standard command and management structures; and emphasis on preparedness, mutual aid and resource management.

The NRP is currently open for comment, and I hope you will be part of our effort to make it a tool that we can all use.

Some of you have heard me advocate that a paradigm shift in emergency management and preparedness is necessary to respond to today's environment. I will continue that drumbeat today.

Although all disasters are local — the paradigm that guides how we respond must allow for FEMA to play an important—and more forward leaning—role in understanding your vulnerabilities so that we can assist you in being better prepared to respond. By leaning further forward to coordinate the federal response, which is more informed through the assessments, we can better serve all Americans.

What You Can Do To Help

I'd like you to take this message back to your communities.

For those seeking to make a difference for America, consider joining FEMA's team. Whether it is as a temporary employee in the field, assisting when needed to respond to disasters, or as a full-time employee developing the depth and breadth of skills to be able to contribute in building the nation's preeminent emergency management agency, a

career at FEMA can be extraordinarily rewarding and one that makes a difference in the lives of disaster victims.

What else can you do to help our nation prepare for and respond to disaster?

Become fully compliant with the National Incident Management System.

Become a “Center of Excellence” at the local level to help your entire first responder community including support agencies become NIMS compliant. We need those fully comfortable and completely qualified with the system to share this knowledge with others in their community.

And finally, help us build a culture of preparedness in America. Everyone has a role to play in preparing for disasters. Americans must “be prepared” to care for themselves and their loved ones during and immediately following a disaster for at least three days until other resources are available.

Conclusion

I have sought to make the case that we have made real progress at FEMA—and I challenge you to take a closer look for yourselves.

Too often, media reports continue to rely on past understanding of what FEMA was in the aftermath of Katrina rather than invest the time and energy to take a closer look at what is different.

I believe we all have a responsibility to examine the changes that FEMA has made, and challenge the assumptions that guide emergency management and preparedness in America.

And, I have worked hard to increase our transparency to accommodate this analysis.

Some of FEMA’s efforts have been evident in the smaller scale tornado events that have occurred around the country in recent months. From Florida, to Georgia & Tennessee, and across the Great Planes and Southwest, we have seen a more responsive, stronger and more nimble FEMA during these events. We did not just wait for a request to come in. We were forward leaning. We began moving early so that there were no delays between a declaration and action.

Today, FEMA:

- Is better aligned and focused on helping America to prepare before an event strikes.
- Has stronger operational systems and plans in place to improve response and coordination.
- Is working to find new ways to help communities recover and rebuild after an event strikes.
- Is committed to working hand-in-hand with our partners at every level of government as well as those in the nonprofit and private sectors.
- Is dedicated to fostering a culture of personal preparedness amongst all Americans.

We are not done yet. There is still much work to do.

But if our progress over the past year is any example, I believe we are on the right track to fulfilling our vision to become the nation's preeminent emergency management and preparedness agency.

At the risk of inviting trouble, I believe a rising tide floats all boats. FEMA has worked hard over the past year to raise the tide in emergency management and preparedness for America. Please continue to help us in these efforts.

Thank you for your time and we look forward to continuing to work with you and your teams in the days and years to come.