

Remarks of R. David Paulison
Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency

National Association of Counties
Large Urban Counties Caucus Annual Meeting

Miami-Dade, FL
May 17, 2007

Thank you for inviting me to join you today to discuss how FEMA and county governments can continue to work together in our response to disasters and emergencies.

Some of you may know that I got my start as a county employee, right here in Miami-Dade. I served as a firefighter and a paramedic and rose to serve as the Chief of the Miami-Dade Fire Department. I know what it means to be part of an Urban County's leadership and appreciate the vital role you play in your communities. During my tenure here, I responded to the ValuJet plane crash, Hurricane Andrew and numerous other major events – as well as the day-to-day issues that all of us see in our communities. It is this local experience that has shaped my views as I moved to serve the entire country – first at the US Fire Administration, then within the Department of Homeland Security, and today at FEMA.

It has been less than a year since I was confirmed in this role by Congress, but we have already made significant improvements. This is not the FEMA of just one year ago. I hope you have already seen this in our relationship with you and your partners on the ground.

We have filled all 10 Regional Administrator positions – for the first time in recent memory – and are committed to working with you at the local level in our response to any disaster. We want open lines of communication and we know that the worst time to exchange business cards is during a disaster. We need to build these relationships today. That's why I'm here and why I encourage each of you to be in touch with our Regional offices. I hope they have already been in contact with you.

FEMA is working hard to make sure we are there when you need us. We have learned much from our mistakes and continue putting reforms into place to address them. In the past year we have made steady progress to improve our preparedness posture so that we will be ready to work with you and your teams when disaster strikes. Whether it is a hurricane, tornado, flood, earthquake, or even a man-made event, FEMA is better prepared to respond this year than ever before.

The New FEMA is leaning further forward to deliver more effective disaster assistance to individuals and communities impacted by a disaster. You can see the results in our response this year to Florida, Georgia, and Alabama tornadoes, the Nor'easter that affected States across the Mid-Atlantic and New England, and just last week in Greensburg, Kansas.

In each of these cases, FEMA was an engaged partner with the tribal, state and local governments immediately. We deployed operational and technical experts, rolled logistics and communications capabilities – even before a disaster declaration – and coordinated with the Governor to facilitate a Presidential disaster declaration. It was also FEMA that supported and helped to facilitate an effective Unified Command amongst the many Federal, tribal, state and local partners involved in the responses. We call this: “engaged partnership.”

It is this philosophy that will guide our actions as we face disasters this year and into the future.

I would like to start by discussing recent reforms to FEMA’s advanced preparations, our plans for operations during a disaster, and our improved ability to help with the long-term recovery.

Local governments will always be the first to respond. But FEMA has an important role to play. The old paradigm of waiting for state and local governments to be overwhelmed before providing federal assistance does not work. Under “engaged partnership,” FEMA has strengthened our relationships with key state, county and local partners. A “one size fits all” approach to emergency management will not work. FEMA is helping each State analyze their strengths and weaknesses. Thus, our planning is more informed and we can better anticipate specific needs and move quickly to support you in times of need.

A visible demonstration of improved Federal capabilities is our playbook of pre-scripted mission assignments. It contains plans for a range of Federal support that may be requested in a disaster, and lays out the inter-agency coordination needed to ensure it gets there. This support ranges from heavy helicopters from DOD, to generators from the Army Corps of Engineers, to Disaster Medical Assistance Teams from HHS and Emergency Road Clearing Teams from the U.S. Forest Service. Don’t believe stories that say FEMA and the federal government do not have plans in place. We do—and they are getting better.

With these preparations underway, FEMA will be ready to act. We have pre-arranged contracts, an improving logistics system, and other elements already in place to expedite our response. FEMA can surge its own teams and assets into an area depending on the need.

This forward leaning New FEMA is evident in our response to the tornado that devastated Greensburg. In the first 72 hours, FEMA coordinated the efforts of numerous Federal agencies. FEMA had our Urban Search & Rescue team on the ground the same day Kansas asked for its support. Supplies were rolling within hours. Mobile support vehicles were on hand. The city and county government set up shop in one of our vehicles and will soon move into temporary buildings we can provide. I am proud of the response by our team of Federal, State and local partners in responding to this tragedy.

Once the immediate impact of a disaster has passed, FEMA is also better prepared to help with the recovery. FEMA's Disaster Assistance Directorate has expanded its capabilities to provide mass care, shelter, debris removal, victim registration – including enhanced protections against waste, fraud and abuse – and coordination among the government and private sector entities all moving to provide assistance.

One recent example is FEMA's response to the storms and flooding that hit the Northeast earlier this spring. FEMA had staff on the ground before the rains stopped – evaluating damage and registering victims. Mobile assistance centers were available in the immediate wake of the storm. The first individual financial aid was actually delivered less than 24 hours after the President signed the first disaster declaration. This fast, efficient, multi-state response shows the type of action you can expect from FEMA in the months and years to come.

There are areas, though, where we could use your assistance – where you can make a difference.

One way you can be of assistance is to help us bring in talented people to FEMA. Encourage qualified people in your community to join FEMA's team. There are a variety of potential opportunities. Temporary employees are needed to be on-call to supplement our operations. Full-time employees who can develop the depth and breadth of skills to build the nation's preeminent emergency management agency are always in demand. And I can tell you a career at FEMA can be extraordinarily rewarding – professionally and personally.

The second area where we could benefit from your help is in building a culture of preparedness in America. Everyone has a role to play in preparing for disasters. First responders are just one percent of the population and can be overwhelmed or unable to reach the scene immediately.

Americans must “be prepared” to care for themselves and their loved ones during and immediately following a disaster until other resources are available. In urban communities, getting through debris or providing the vast quantity of supplies could pose a challenge. Greensburg, Kansas had less than 10,000 families that needed help. Should disaster strike in your communities, we could potentially be called on to assist

10 or 100 times that number. Government can and will help those who most in need. But a little bit of preparedness can go a long way to reducing the burden on all of us.

FEMA is reaching out in new ways to promote personal preparedness. One example: our Citizen Corps Councils. Serving 74 percent of the population, these Councils provide a ready means to foster participation by community and government leaders, and a way to inform, train, and engage citizens in community preparedness that can support our first responders in an emergency. Under the Citizen Corps are more than 2,100 Citizen Corps Councils, more than 2,600 Community Response Teams (CERT) and Hundreds of Fire Corps and Medical Reserve Corps. For example, in Los Angeles they are developing a Medical Reserve Corps with more than 500 volunteer physicians and nurses and over 100 volunteer chaplains.

I believe we have made real progress at FEMA. By leaning further forward to coordinate the federal response, which is more informed through assessments and communications with our partners, we can better serve all Americans.

Today, FEMA:

- Has created “engaged partnerships” with tribal, State and local governments;
- Has supported and helped to facilitate an effective Unified Command amongst the many Federal, tribal, state and local partners;
- Has engaged with states to gain a better understanding of their vulnerabilities;
- Has improved logistics and communications capabilities to improve response; and,
- Has enhanced Disaster Assistance capabilities for recovery efforts.

Of course, we are not done yet. There is still much work to do.

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

I am especially proud of the men and women who work at FEMA. They have put their hearts and souls into rebuilding this agency. I hope you are as proud to work with them on the ground as I am to work with them every day.

Thank you again for the work that all of you do in your communities. Thank you for inviting me to join you this evening. God bless you, and God bless America.