

Statement as Prepared for Senator Joseph Lieberman
Hurricane Katrina: Federal Response
Washington, DC
February 10, 2006

Thank you Madam Chairman. Today and Tuesday we will hear directly from the top leadership of both the Federal Emergency Management Agency and its parent, the Department of Homeland Security.

Our hearings to date have set the stage for these panels. We have broken much new ground in our investigation and today we have tough questions to ask.

Our investigation has shown a gross lack of planning and preparation by both DHS and FEMA that guaranteed that the response to Hurricane Katrina – or any catastrophe that might have happened – was doomed to be uncoordinated, inadequate and, therefore, more damaging than it should have been.

We have heard from more than 25 panels of witnesses who have spoken of the full range of failures during Katrina.

We have learned of one failure after another in evacuation, search and rescue, law and order, emergency medical treatment and deployment of assets.

And we have learned that the federal government simply was not prepared to overcome these predictable challenges in this predictable and predicted hurricane. Even those responsible acknowledge that they did not meet the desperate needs of the people of the Gulf Coast.

FEMA and DHS officials have told us in interviews and in evidence gathered by our staff. I would like to read just a few of those statements:

- From Michael Lowder, FEMA's Deputy Director of Response, who in an Aug. 27, 2005, e-mail said: "If this is the "New Orleans scenario, we're already way behind."
- From Scott Wells, a FEMA Federal Coordinating officer, or FCO, "This was a catastrophic disaster. We don't have the structure; we don't have the people for catastrophic disaster. It's that simple.
- From FEMA FCO Bill Lokey: "Communications and coordination was lacking – preplanning was lacking. We were not prepared for this."
- From former FEMA Director Michael Brown – who we will be hearing from today – when asked the question: "Before Katrina, was FEMA ready for this kind of catastrophe?": said simply: "I don't think so."
- And finally from Secretary Chertoff, who we will hear from Tuesday: "But I also think [Katrina] tested our planning and our planning fell short."

When DHS was created in 2002, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9-11, I said that I hoped to see a "coordinated, consolidated, and accountable Department of Homeland Security."

In this investigation we have seen so little effective coordination and consolidation that we must hold DHS accountable and ask urgently that it do a lot better.

We hoped that DHS would quickly evolve into a world-class agency that had the planning, personnel and materials in place to respond swiftly and effectively in a disaster – natural or terrorist.

Katrina showed us DHS has a lot of work to do – on itself.

Despite ample warnings that New Orleans is a bowl covered by inadequate levees that would be overtopped or breached in a big hurricane, despite the specific warnings of the mock Hurricane Pam exercise that government at all levels was unprepared to protect New Orleans from the expected Big Hurricane, and despite the specific mentions of emergency preparedness and rescue responsibilities in the National Response Plan of January 2005, when Katrina hit, America's government was largely unprepared to protect the people of the Gulf Coast.

These things came to pass.

- Nature hit New Orleans hard, but also gave its people a break by hitting hardest 15 miles to the east. Because of the failure to effectively evacuate the poor and infirm who could not evacuate themselves, if Katrina had hit New Orleans directly, the death toll probably would have been in the tens of thousands as Pam predicted.
- In the days before the storm, FEMA failed to pre-stage personnel in New Orleans – other than a single public affairs employee – or move adequate amounts of crucial supplies of food, water and medical supplies to the scene.
- DHS failed to implement the Catastrophic Incident Annex to the National Response Plan, which would have triggered a more aggressive federal response.
- DHS failed to develop an effective plan to maintain accurate situation assessments at Homeland Security Operations Center – the nation's disaster nerve center. And that failure led to ignoring reports that the levees were being breached and overtopped – and that the city had flooded with people trapped in attics and on rooftops.
- FEMA was late in bringing in Search and Rescue teams and then pulled them out for security reasons, even though other agencies continued the life-saving work.
- DHS failed to stand up until the day after landfall the Interagency Incident Management Group (IIMG) – the senior-level interagency group charged with helping coordinate the federal response to a catastrophe. Activating this group brought more federal resources to bear earlier, like who was in charge of security – the Department of Justice or DHS.
- Yesterday, we heard from General Bennett C. Landreneau of the Louisiana National Guard, who told us the buses promised by FEMA before the storm for post landfall evacuation – and then at different points on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday after the storm – did not arrive until Thursday and caused the suffering at the Superdome that the world saw.

All these mistakes meant time was lost and lives were threatened or lost.

Time is everything in a crisis like Katrina, as New Orleans Police Department Superintendent Riley told us this week. People were drowning in flooded streets and yards, breaking onto their rooftops with axes to await rescue, starving in attics, and feeling they had been abandoned and losing all hope as their ventilators and medical support systems failed for lack of power.

Those lucky enough to escape made it to the Superdome or Convention Center. And America and the world saw that grim picture of human neglect there.

Because timing and situational awareness is central to every catastrophe, today's hearing will also look at what the most senior officials in the federal government knew about the flooding of New Orleans and the breaking of the levees and when they knew it. A little less than a week after Katrina made landfall, Secretary Chertoff said that, and I quote:

“It was on Tuesday that the levee—may have been overnight Monday to Tuesday—that the levee started to break. And it was midday Tuesday that I became aware of the fact that there was no possibility of plugging the gap and that essentially the lake was going to start to drain into the city.

“I think that second catastrophe really caught everybody by surprise.”

We will talk to Secretary Chertoff about that next week. Today we will ask some of his senior staff how the news media, numerous federal agencies, and even the American Red Cross could be aware of growing and catastrophic floods in New Orleans all day Monday, the day of landfall, while the leadership of Department of Homeland Security somehow didn't know about it.

Exhibit Q details more than 25 reports of flooding, levee breaches, and desperate citizens seeking refuge from rising flood waters in attics and on rooftops that began coming in as early as 8:30 AM on Monday, August 29. A selection of them are shown on these boards. They include:

- At 9:14 AM Eastern Time, the National Weather Service issued a Flash Flood Warning reporting that “A levee breach occurred along the industrial canal at Tennessee St. 3-8 feet of water is expected due to the breach.”
- Then, two hour later, at 11:13, the White House Homeland Security Council issued a report that said, in part:
 - Flooding is significant throughout the region and a levee in New Orleans has reportedly been breached sending 6-8 feet of water throughout the 9th Ward area of the city.
 - HSOC reports that due to rising water in the 9th Ward, residents are in their attics and on their roofs.”
- At 8:34 in the evening, the Army Corps of Engineers issued a situation report stating that “[t]here is flooding in St. Bernard Parish with reports of water up to the roofs of homes” and that “All Jefferson and Orleans Parish Pumping Stations are inoperable as of 29 Aug.”
- Finally, Marty Bahamonde, a FEMA employee who testified before this Committee earlier in our investigation, took a flight on a Coast Guard helicopter over New Orleans at approximately 6:30 pm Eastern Time.
- A report from 10:30 PM Monday night said that “there is a quarter-mile breach in the levee near the 17th Street Canal about 200 yards from Lake Ponchartrain allowing water to flow into the City . . . an estimated 2/3 to 75% of the city is under water . . . Hundreds of people were observed on the balconies and roofs of a major apartment complex in the city . . . A few bodies were seen floating in the water and Coast Guard pilots also reported seeing bodies but there are no details on locations.

Mr. Bahamonde took these photos, which graphically showed the flooding. And still the highest officials believed the city had dodged a bullet.

Madam Chairman, we must ask some tough questions today because we must have answers if we are to make changes at DHS and to our overall federal disaster response so this never happens again.

In the early aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina debacle, former FEMA Director Michael Brown was singularly blamed for the inadequate federal government response.

Our investigation shows that Mr/ Brown did not do a lot of what he should have done,. But he was not alone.

Our investigation has shown that there was a massive failure by government at all levels and by those who lead it to prepare and respond as they had a responsibility to do.

In the federal government, the response to Katrina, with the exceptions of the Weather Service and the Coast Guard, there was a shocking, consequential and pervasive lack of preparation, response and leadership.

Mr. Brown, I understand you are prepared this morning to answer our questions fully and truthfully. I appreciate that very much. In doing so, I believe you will be serving the public interest and this Committee's interest in finding out exactly why the federal government failed in its preparations and response to Hurricane Katrina, so we can together make sure it never happens again.

Katrina has passed. But the clock is reset and ticking again. We know we will have to respond to another disaster – natural or terrorist. We cannot – and will not – let the clock run out on us again.