

Opening Statement of  
Senator Susan M. Collins  
Committee on Homeland Security  
and Governmental Affairs

“Implementing FEMA Reform:  
Are We Prepared for the 2007 Hurricane Season?”

May 22, 2007

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**Last year, this Committee conducted an in-depth investigation into the flawed response to Hurricane Katrina. We held 24 hearings, interviewed 400 people, and reviewed 838,000 pages of documents. The result was a detailed report and comprehensive legislation, the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, which became law in October.**

**That Act brought about sweeping changes to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). It raised FEMA’s visibility, protected its status and**

**budget within the Department of Homeland Security, gave its Administrator a direct channel to the President, restored the linkage between preparedness and response, strengthened its regional presence, and established multi-agency strike teams to promote rapid and effective action.**

**The horrors of Hurricane Katrina and the universal dissatisfaction with the response of government at all levels necessitated these changes.**

**The 2007 hurricane season starts on June 1, and the widely regarded Colorado State University forecast calls for a “very active season,” with a strong chance of major-hurricane landfalls. This is the ideal time to ask whether or not FEMA is better prepared for potentially significant storms.**

**While memories of Hurricane Katrina and the approaching Atlantic-hurricane season provide the impetus for this timely hearing, the purpose of our reform efforts was broader than the response to hurricanes, or even to natural disasters in general. Our legislation explicitly defined FEMA's mission as all-hazards, whether natural or man-made, and invoked the full panoply of emergency-management functions – preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation.**

**Our nation is regularly challenged by fires, floods, tornados, earthquakes, and at times by terrorist attacks. So when we ask whether FEMA is prepared for the 2007 hurricane season, we are really posing a question that is proxy for a broader and deeper set of concerns.**

**FEMA Administrator Paulison recently testified that his agency is “leaning forward” as an “engaged partner” with state and local agencies. He noted, in particular, the agency’s commendable response to recent tornados in the Midwest and to the April storm that caused great destruction in my home state of Maine. While the effective response to these disasters is indeed encouraging, and while they were certainly devastating to the many communities that were struck, obviously neither disaster approached the scope of Hurricane Katrina.**

**I am encouraged by FEMA’s new operating agreement with the Defense Logistics Agency, and by its new capabilities for procuring, delivering, and monitoring supplies. None of us will soon forget the shocking and sometimes tragic stories of supplies delayed, spoiled, or misdirected because of**

**inadequate or non-existent management tools for logistics that hampered the response to Katrina's victims. The agency's new, proactive stance in handling essential commodities in anticipation of need is a welcome change.**

**FEMA is also adopting new controls that will increase assistance to victims as well as curtail fraud and abuse.**

**There are other indications of progress. Earlier this month, I attended FEMA Region One's "Hurricane Yvette" exercise in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. It is clear that FEMA's increased regional focus is yielding improved contact and cooperation with state officials – cooperation that must be established before a disaster strikes, not on the scene of one. I have also heard positive reports**

**about improved coordination with the military due to the assignment of Defense Coordinating Officers to regional FEMA offices.**

**I welcome these encouraging signs. But natural disasters and enemy attacks challenge us most where our defenses are weak. Administrator Paulison's caution that "There is still much work to do," requires our attention. Florida's emergency-management director, Craig Fugate, has testified that declining funding for the Emergency Preparedness Grant Program is a serious obstacle to state efforts to achieve satisfactory levels of preparation and protection.**

**The Chairman and I have successfully fought for additional funding for this important program, but we must continue to ensure it has adequate support.**

**And to this day, residents of the Gulf Coast still point to a cumbersome bureaucracy that hinders the delivery of aid and reconstruction assistance.**

**As a new hurricane season approaches, FEMA remains somewhat in flux. The National Response Plan and the National Incident Management System are still being revised; FEMA's reorganization is not yet complete; and coordination with other federal partners is still a work in progress.**

**FEMA's readiness is a complicated question with great reach, ranging from interpersonal relations and organizational structure, to the intricacies of establishing interoperable communications networks and coordinating movements of large numbers of responders and evacuees.**

**I thank our witnesses for coming here to help us explore our readiness to respond to the inevitable next disaster, regardless of its cause.**

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