

Statement of Senator Susan M. Collins

HSGAC Business Meeting

June 25, 2008

I will speak briefly on two bills on our agenda that I believe warrant special mention and our support.

First, we have an opportunity to reauthorize the Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program through 2013. This important program's current authorization expires at the end of FY 2008. FEMA Administrator Paulison has written to ask for its reauthorization, and that request is supported by the national emergency-management groups.

The Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program makes competitive awards to states that submit plans for projects that would mitigate disaster damage. More than 200 current projects in the program include erosion

control, seismic retrofits, tornado shelters, riverine-flood control, and other measures to prevent or reduce damage from disasters. A Congressional Budget Office review of three years of data estimated the program saves \$3 in disaster response for every mitigation dollar spent. The National Institute of Building Sciences estimates the payback at four to one -- impressive scores that confirm the program's status as a sound investment.

Last Friday, Senator Lieberman and I introduced a reauthorization bill. Rather than authorizing a large, sudden jump in program funding, our bill starts with a \$160 million authorization in FY 2009 and builds by \$10 million increments to \$200 million for FY 2013. Given the current climate of fiscal constraints, this is a substantial yet responsible way to ramp up a cost-effective program. We used \$160 million as our starting point because that

figure represents the most ever appropriated for the program (FY 2003).

The second bill that I want to mention is the Federal Firefighters Fairness Act. Senators Carper and Warner have brought this bill forward, and I am pleased to be a cosponsor. The major national fire service organizations, including the International Association of Fire Fighters and the International Association of Fire Chiefs, also support the bill.

The bill addresses an unfair hurdle faced by federal firefighters who suffer from an occupational illness. Current law requires them to specify the precise exposure that caused their illness - a huge challenge for many firefighters, who serve for years surrounded by a variety of hazards whose effects may not immediately or unequivocally manifest themselves.

This bill would create a rebuttable presumption that, for the purposes of disability retirement benefits determination, federal firefighters who become disabled or die as a result of heart and lung diseases, certain specified cancers, and certain specified infectious diseases contracted their illnesses on the job.

I understand Senator Carper will offer some revised language to address concerns about the scope of employees and diseases covered by the bill. Those changes will not undermine the merits of the measure giving firefighters and their families a more reasonable standard for deciding whether disability or death was related to public service.

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