

Hurricane Katrina: Perspectives of FEMA's Operations Professionals
Senator Joe Lieberman
December 8, 2005

Thank you Madam Chairman for calling this hearing.

We've already held several important and informative hearings about Hurricane Katrina – the fate of the levees, the actions of the private sector in the wake of the storm, and the testimony of Marty Bahamonde's dangerous days as he tried to get help to the thousands stranded in the Superdome.

This morning's witnesses move the Committee's investigation forward on the path toward finding out what went wrong before and after Hurricane Katrina so that we can make sure it never happens again.

I want to thank our witnesses for the testimony they are about to give. Although some of what you say about FEMA's response to Katrina may well come under criticism today, I know that each of you has a distinguished history of public service and I respect you for that.

But, having reviewed your testimony, and other testimony and documents gathered by the Committee so far, I conclude that FEMA is a troubled agency that failed in its prime mission – the mission it draws its name from – “Emergency Management.”

The whole world watched disaster develop in the Gulf of Mexico and move toward the Gulf Coast and listened as forecasters said this was the long-dreaded “big one” that could take out the levees and flood the Big Easy.

Yet FEMA somehow miscalculated the gravity of the storm coming and failed to realize that doing business as usual would compound the disaster.

Katrina simply was not a typical hurricane that allowed FEMA to work off of its typical playbook – but one that required a more aggressive and urgent federal response.

Katrina was a catastrophe. It knocked out many of the state and local communications and response capabilities and overwhelmed those that remained.

But FEMA seemed to expect this severely damaged state and local response network – itself the victim of the catastrophe – to operate as if it was at full and normal capacity.

We have been astonished to learn in the course of the investigation that the battle plan for catastrophes – the National Response Plan's Catastrophic Incident Annex – was never activated. And FEMA apparently still believes it should not have been.

As we will hear today, FEMA deployed too few people to respond to Katrina and deployed them too slowly. Many of those it did deploy apparently failed to appreciate what the breaking of the levees meant, even when they belatedly learned of the breaks – a

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failure that had disastrous consequences for the people of New Orleans.

Let me give an example. As we learned at our previous hearings, New Orleans' Industrial Canal levees were leveled by the storm surge early Monday morning, August 29.

That led to almost immediate and catastrophic flooding in the eastern part of the city, including the Lower Ninth Ward.

By midday, the Lake Pontchartrain levees were breaking, which led to a much slower flooding of downtown New Orleans – what we so often heard referred to as New Orleans filling like a bowl.

Marty Bahamonde told us that he communicated these facts by midday to FEMA and had a conference call with FEMA officials at the EOC, among others, that night.

We now know that other sources were providing the same information throughout the day to the Baton Rouge Emergency Operations Center where FEMA's top regional operators were stationed.

Yet, as we will hear from one of our witnesses today, Mr. Parr, who led the FEMA emergency response team sent to the Superdome, the team didn't depart Baton Rouge for New Orleans until noon Tuesday – almost a full day after the hurricane had passed.

By that time, Lake Ponchartrain had been dumping its waters into downtown New Orleans for hours, making it impossible for the FEMA team to bring its vital communications tractor-trailer – wonderfully named “Red October” – into the city.

This left the team without any reliable means of communications and reduced its effectiveness in New Orleans by some 90 percent, according to Mr. Parr's testimony.

But this wasn't the only costly delay.

We've learned from other witnesses that the Coast Guard was performing rescue missions as soon as hurricane-force winds abated on Monday afternoon.

The State sent its rescue boats out late Monday afternoon.

But FEMA's search and rescue teams didn't arrive in New Orleans until Tuesday morning.

Again, given the catastrophic nature of Katrina's damage – something well understood by these other agencies – I find it impossible to understand why FEMA wasn't prepared to move sooner.

And the worst part of it all is not just that this was all foreseeable. In fact, it had been foreseen.

This precise disaster scenario used in the Hurricane Pam planning exercise conducted in June 2004. It had also been the topic of numerous media stories and Hurricane Conferences for years.

This was not a failure of imagination, as some in our Federal response apparatus want to label it.

It was a failure of realization – realization that the catastrophe, about which they had been long warned, was about to occur and that they needed to move quickly to address it.

Under these kinds of catastrophic conditions, FEMA should not have seen its role as a butler waiting in the wings to assist when called.

Rather, it needed to be a battler, anticipating the problems and making the
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bureaucracy move quickly for the safety and security of the people of the Gulf Coast.

Yes, a disaster like Hurricane Katrina is an Act of God that cannot be prevented. Yes, there will be confusion in such natural disasters. Yes, mistakes made by well-intentioned people.

But adequately preparing for and responding to a disaster of this magnitude required a well-led, well-trained and well-drilled FEMA that had a plan in place and a sense of mission to guide its actions.

All these things seemed to have been lacking as disaster swept across the Gulf Coast region last August.

Thank you Madam Chairman.