

Opening Statement

**Senator Susan M. Collins
Chairman, Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Committee**

**Hurricane Katrina: Perspectives of FEMA's Operations
Professionals**

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Today, the Committee continues its investigation into the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina. This morning, at our eighth hearing, we will hear from three witnesses who are among the Federal Emergency Management Agency's most experienced emergency managers and operations professionals.

Each of our witnesses – Scott Wells, Philip Parr, and William Carwile – was directly involved in Katrina preparation and response. They will give us a more complete understanding of FEMA's role, share their observations about

the state and local response, and provide their insights and recommendations for reforms.

One of our witnesses today has described the national emergency response as a “bottom-up” system, with local and state authorities leading the way, and federal authorities coordinating operations and the deployment of resources. In Katrina, this system broke down, and the result was the very deprivation and suffering this structure was designed to avoid. The system must be fixed, from the bottom to the very top.

One of the most glaring breakdowns was in communications. Certainly, this powerful storm devastated the land-based communications infrastructure throughout the Gulf Region and severely hampered evacuation, rescue, and relief efforts. This, however, is an utterly foreseeable result of

howling winds and surging water that apparently was not adequately anticipated or compensated for.

At our last hearing, on November 16th, we heard testimony from private sector witnesses who stressed the critical importance of maintaining communications in disaster management. They emphasized that good communications are the lifeblood of emergency operations, allowing for the effective movement of personnel and assets and real-time assessments. In each of these companies, developing and maintaining robust systems, importing extra communications gear, and re-establishing contact with the outside world were of the utmost priority, and a key component of their preparedness plans. Their outstanding performance stands in stark contrast to the inability of government at all levels to plan and execute back-up communications systems.

FEMA has mobile communications vehicles, but by the time anyone thought to bring one to the Superdome, the building was already surrounded by water, and FEMA was apparently unable to figure out a way to get its equipment into the building. FEMA also has communications equipment that could have been airlifted in. But despite Mr. Parr's urgent requests for such equipment, none arrived. Mr. Parr estimates that the unfortunate lack of communications equipment reduced his team's effectiveness by an astounding 90 percent.

Much of the post-Katrina criticism has been justifiably focused on FEMA. But today's witnesses will explain that Katrina also exposed serious flaws at the local and state level that contributed to the suffering experienced by so many in the Gulf Region. For example, according to the staff interview

of Mr. Wells, Louisiana’s emergency operations officials failed to follow – perhaps even to comprehend – the National Response Plan, which is an integrated system designed to coordinate federal, state, and local responses to a disaster. Indeed, Mr. Wells notes that Louisiana’s emergency managers were getting training on the critical Incident Command System two days after the storm hit.

Today’s witnesses will also help us determine how FEMA, state, and local officials can do better. They are all current or former Federal Coordinating Officers (FCO) and possess a wealth of emergency management experience.

The FCOs play a critical role in FEMA. In June of 2004, the Federal Coordinating Officer cadre urged Undersecretary Michael Brown to undertake reforms to remove obstacles to

command, control and core mission accomplishment, and to reconfigure and enhance the National Emergency Response Teams. The memorandum strongly advised that these reforms be implemented to help prepare for, quote, “the next big one.” But we will hear today that disturbingly little was done in response to these recommendations, far too little to prepare for the “big one” when it hit 14 months later.

I very much appreciate the testimony of our witnesses today so that we are better prepared for the catastrophic events yet to come.