

# **Preparing for a Catastrophe: The Hurricane Pam Exercise**

Statement before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee

by

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I would like to thank the committee for inviting me today to speak on the events of the planning exercise known as “Hurricane Pam.” As part of the Southeast Louisiana Catastrophic Planning Project, with this event we began the process of trying to fully understand and prepare for the effects of a catastrophic hurricane in Southeast Louisiana. However, before getting into the events of the exercise, I would like to speak first about the events that led up to Hurricane Pam.

### **Background**

In 1998, the Louisiana Office of Emergency Preparedness (now known as the Louisiana Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness or LOHSEP), realized after Hurricane Georges that more planning was needed for post-landfall consequences after a major hurricane. A working group was convened consisting of Federal, State, and local participants to brainstorm the issues that Louisiana would be facing if a Category 3 or higher storm ever hit Southeast Louisiana. The work of this meeting and a later meeting held in New Orleans in 1999 was the development of a white paper, which outlined a planning proposal that was submitted to FEMA in August of 2000. The paper requested FEMA’s help in planning and preparing for a catastrophic hurricane that could hit Southeast Louisiana. A year later, in August of 2001, a second letter was sent to FEMA Headquarters through the FEMA Region VI office, requesting that the same action be taken.

Later in August 2001, FEMA Headquarters awarded a contract to URS Corporation for catastrophic planning support. However, due to the events of September 11, 2001, there were many delays that occurred in this planning process. In December 2001, a kick-off organizational meeting was held in New Orleans with FEMA Headquarters, FEMA Region VI, and State participants, to organize a process to use the URS contract that was awarded earlier that year.

At this December meeting, a committee structure was developed and a plan was formulated for catastrophic planning. This included a budget that the State and FEMA Region VI would need to carry out the planning process. In January 2002, FEMA Headquarters informed the State and Region VI that there would be no further funding for this project, due to budget shortfalls. The funding already in place could be used by the contractor to do what it could on its own, which included identifying large tracts of land that could potentially be used for temporary housing setup.

Following Hurricane Lili, the process was revived again for a short period in December 2002. FEMA Headquarters sent a representative to help LOHSEP reformulate the plans that we had developed the year prior, and to establish a budget. This request was sent back through the chain to FEMA Headquarters, proposing to use mitigation funding, and once again the request was turned down.

In September of 2003, there was a conference call with FEMA Region VI and FEMA Headquarters to discuss catastrophic planning. This led to a meeting on November 18, 2003, in New Orleans on this subject. Attending this meeting was a representative from the President’s Homeland Security Advisory Council. At the meeting LOHSEP and

FEMA Region VI briefed the need for catastrophic planning, and he was astonished that as of that date we had not completed this type of plan, and promised to do what he could to help us get funding for this planning process.

This brings us to the Southeast Louisiana Catastrophic Planning project. On March 17, 2004, FEMA Headquarters called FEMA Region VI and the State of Louisiana and informed us that FEMA HQ had funding for catastrophic planning for Southeast Louisiana. The very next day, on March 18, 2004, LOHSEP and FEMA Region VI quickly organized a Unified Command, consisting of the leadership of LOHSEP and FEMA Region VI. A concept was presented to the Unified Command by the lead planner from FEMA Region VI, which was quickly adopted and approved by the Unified Command. At this time, LOHSEP and FEMA Region VI formed a Steering Committee to organize the planning event. This Committee consisted of me representing LOHSEP and a representative from FEMA Region VI. (Later, a representative from FEMA Headquarters was added to the Committee as well.) The very next week, an initial meeting was held in Baton Rouge to discuss this plan of action, which led to the creation of Hurricane Pam. On April 7, 2004, a meeting was held during the National Hurricane Conference in Orlando, Florida, to discuss the concept with representatives from FEMA Headquarters, and to request that FEMA Headquarters find a contractor that could support this planning process.

On May 19, 2004, I was at FEMA Region VI in Denton, Texas, working on the details of the proposed exercise when we were informed by FEMA Headquarters that they intended to award a contract to IEM, Inc. to support this planning project.

FEMA Headquarters faxed the proposed Statement of Work (SOW) to FEMA Region VI for the contract that was to be awarded, and said that IEM would be there to help the State and the Region to get the planning done in the timeframe we had been given. The SOW was not exactly what LOHSEP and FEMA Region VI told FEMA Headquarters that we wanted. However, Headquarters assured us that the SOW was written flexibly in order to get the contract in place quickly, so that we could get started with whatever planning needed to be done in the timeframe that was allotted. We had to be through by September 30, the end of the Federal fiscal year. When we first started looking at this concept in March, the exercise was scheduled for June of 2004. We had to keep pushing the start of the exercise back until a contractor was in place to support the project. However we also knew that this planning event had to take place before August because the height of the hurricane season for the Gulf of Mexico is typically August and September.

From the word “Go,” it was understood that this wasn’t going to be a typical exercise. In fact, when the concept was first given to me that we were going to have an exercise to develop a plan, I immediately disagreed. Usually, you write a plan and then have an exercise. However, when it was explained to me that we were taking an exercise scenario which generated real consequences and real data and bringing operational level people in so they could make decisions using that real data and consequences, which would then drive the writing of the plan, I quickly got on board. I championed the fact that we were

using operational people to write the plan; because there are too many times a plan is written without taking the operational aspects into account and this leads to non-usable plans.

Also, it needs to be pointed out that all levels of government had existing plans prior to this exercise. This planning exercise was developed to work on a “bridging document” that would form a bridge from the local to State to Federal levels.

In the initial concept, the exercise was set up to last for 14 days, with all participants involved for the full two weeks. However, FEMA Headquarters said the price for an event that long was too high. So, the exercise was reduced to eight days (three days pre-landfall and five days post-landfall); only the five days of post-landfall discussion included all participants. (The Planning and Steering Committees met the day before the exercise started as well as the day after the exercise ended.)

We started the exercise with three days of pre-landfall discussions with just FEMA Headquarters, Region VI, and the State, to set the tone for the rest of the week. These discussions were very focused on what the Federal Government and the State would be doing pre-landfall: what the State would be requesting, and what the Federal Government would be staging. FEMA Region VI looked to LOHSEP to choose the topics that the exercise was going to concentrate on, however all topics were agreed upon by both FEMA Region VI and LOHSEP before we moved forward. It was the belief of LOHSEP’s decision-makers (myself included) that we needed to focus on human needs first. That’s how most of the topics for the exercise were chosen: Search and Rescue, Sheltering, Medical Care, Long-term Housing, Schools—with the one exception being Debris Management.

We initially met with the exercise contractor, IEM, at FEMA Region VI in Denton, Texas, on May 20. By that point, Region VI and the State had already spent two months preparing the details of how we wanted to do things, and we presented this concept to the contractor at that meeting. I pointed out, and FEMA Region VI agreed, that we had to work as a team and stick to our game plan to get this event accomplished in the time period available. We had only 53 days to put together something that would normally take six months to a year to plan. And we couldn’t push it back any further because August and September are the “hot” months for hurricanes in the Gulf. (We were already pushing it by holding the exercise in July.)

We tried to involve local emergency managers as much as we could. For instance, when IEM developed a set of consequence estimates, the Planning Committee (LOHSEP, FEMA Region VI, and IEM) would meet with or poll local emergency managers to include them in the planning process from the beginning. Because of the tight timeframe, they were not as involved as we would have liked, but we tried to keep them involved as much as time would allow.

### **Participation in and Evaluation of the Exercise**

The Hurricane Pam exercise ran from July 16-23. On a typical day of the main exercise, we had six breakout rooms which had the same assigned topics for the entire week. Then we had three action rooms, which were assigned topics on a day-to-day basis. Each day, the breakout rooms were responsible for writing a certain portion of the action plan based on the template that had been agreed upon by FEMA Region VI and LOHSEP prior to the event. The contractor had a facilitator and a recorder in every room to make sure that the room completed its task for the day. Also assigned to each room were a Federal and a State lead who were responsible for briefing the Unified Command on a day-to-day basis. This process lasted for five days.

Each day of the main exercise started with a briefing, led by me, to the entire 300+ participants, in the Operations Center at LOHSEP. This briefing included a presentation by a representative of the National Weather Service (Southern Region) of the day's simulated weather events from the fictitious Hurricane Pam.

After the weather briefing, a briefing on the scenario consequences that resulted from the weather conditions was given by the contractor, IEM. Then the operations officers from LOHSEP and FEMA Region VI would take the action room topics determined by the Unified Command for the day and assign agencies to send representatives to those action rooms. Then, the main body would break up and participants would go to their assigned breakout and action rooms.

FEMA Region VI and LOHSEP expected that the action rooms would only produce the beginnings or the framework of a plan that would have to be fleshed out later; the breakout rooms, since they had five days to work on the plan, were expected to produce more of a complete plan. However, we also knew that the breakout rooms would not develop a 100% answer within the five days that we had to work with either.

I was the State lead for the day-to-day decision making for the design and execution of the planning exercise, with guidance and input from my Assistant Director. I was the main point of contact for the State in dealing with the contractor and FEMA. I worked closely with them during the exercise, making sure that we stayed on schedule and that deliverables were being met in the breakout rooms. I was also responsible for working with the Unified Command to determine the topics for the action rooms on a day-to-day basis, and making sure that any questions the Unified Command had were getting answered.

During the breakout sessions, I tried to visit each breakout room to make sure that they were staying on track and to answer any questions they might have had about the scenario or what the responsibilities of the day were. During this time, I also worked with the contractor to help resolve any issues that came up during the course of the week; I ensured that the briefings to the Unified Command were happening on schedule; and I worked with the FEMA and the State operations officers to make sure that the right people were assigned to the appropriate rooms and topics. I also dealt with the many routine logistical issues associated with a weeklong gathering of more than 300 people.

On the last day of the exercise, a meeting was held with representatives from FEMA Headquarters, FEMA Region VI, the State, and IEM—basically, the Planning and Steering Committees of the exercise. We talked about the next steps and delivery schedules. We felt the need for follow-on workshops, but we did not come to any official decisions that day about what those follow-on workshops would cover.

Since this was not a standard exercise, there was no formal evaluation process. As I mentioned previously, this was an exercise that was designed to develop a plan, not to test a plan. In my opinion, the exercise was very successful—not because we developed the perfect plans, but because it brought operational-level players to the table to begin the planning process. We never expected to come up with a 100% solution. It was always felt that if we had a 70% start, that we would be successful. The scenario-based planning exercise, in my opinion, has produced the foundation for a very successful plan. However, due to funding and time constraints, we had to be very selective about the topics that were covered during the main exercise and during the follow-on exercises.

### **Understanding of the Scenario**

The Planning Committee—which consisted of FEMA Region VI representatives, me as the State representative, and the contractor—developed a scenario to show that it did not take a Category 4 or 5 hurricane to cause catastrophic effects in Southeast Louisiana. I wanted to show that a Category 3 on the right track could cause these catastrophic events to occur. The storm was based on a Hurricane Georges scenario, except in this case, the hurricane didn't turn toward Mississippi (as Georges did), but hit Louisiana directly.

The National Weather Service (Southern Region) helped in the development of the weather scenario for Hurricane Pam. I gave them the overall parameters: I wanted a slow-moving Category 3 hurricane that overtopped the levees in New Orleans, coming from the southeast, moving northwest. The National Weather Service, working with other NOAA partners, came up with the exact track and the characteristics of the storm. The overtopping of the levees was included to cause the catastrophic flooding conditions from the storm surge.

The contractor was responsible for development of the consequences based on the storm scenario that the National Weather Service developed—fatalities, communications outages, energy outages, cubic yards of debris, home damages, etc. All consequences were reviewed by the Planning Committee and the Unified Command; in addition, certain consequences were reviewed by the parish emergency management officials. This was to ensure the believability of the consequences and to get buy-in from the local emergency management officials. We knew that if the consequences weren't believable, then the focus of the players during the exercise would be on disputing the consequence numbers and not on developing the plans.

Although the Planning Committee felt that we were very successful in getting buy-in from most parties, there were still some side conversations discussing the consequences. We tried to keep these to a minimum in order to stay focused on the task at hand—developing the bridging document. For instance, there were some discussions about the

projected number of fatalities. Even though the parishes agreed with the numbers, some Federal participants from FEMA Regions IV and VI said during the exercise that they felt the projections were too high. (The numbers were based on a combination of a US Army Corps of Engineers Study, historical evacuation rates from Hurricane Georges, and ground-truthing conducted with parishes and the State.) Also, there were questions by some participants about the projected flood depths of the waters that were based on the approved model (the Sea, Lake and Overland Surges from Hurricanes, or SLOSH model); however, further analysis showed that other models produced similar numbers.

### **Areas of Agreement Regarding Responsibilities and Response Times by Parish, State, and Federal Agencies**

It has always been common knowledge within emergency management that the locals and the States would have to be prepared to sustain themselves for a period of 48-72 hours before they could expect major Federal resources to be on the scene. It has always been taught in emergency management that the Federal Government is not a first responder. There are some exceptions to this with the Coast Guard and other agencies, but for the most part, the Federal Government is not (and in my opinion should not be) a first responder.

As far as the Hurricane Pam exercise is concerned, since I was not in every breakout room 100% of the time, I can't speak specifically to verbal promises that anyone made to anyone else in the rooms. The official results of those discussions in the breakout rooms were captured within the Southeast Louisiana Catastrophic Hurricane Plan. After the exercise was over, every participant received a copy of the plans that came out of the exercise. Again, we understood that we just had the beginning of the answer, and more collective work by the Federal, State, and local participants was required to resolve all the issues that were raised.

### **Planning LOHSEP Undertook to Incorporate Lessons Learned from the Exercise.**

One of the primary things LOHSEP recognized at the conclusion of the exercise was that we needed to update our State plan to reflect the Federal Response Plan (now the National Response Plan).

The State plan is on a four-year planning cycle, and we were at the end of that cycle, so it was time for an update. We also knew that the Federal Response Plan was going through a major revision to become the National Response Plan. As the Planning Chief, I advised the Deputy Director for Emergency Management that we should wait for a final draft version of the National Response Plan to come out before we updated our plan, so that we didn't have to update it twice. We started that process in late 2004.

Essentially, we changed our State plan from a functional format to the Emergency Support Function (ESF) format, including the 15 ESFs associated with the National Response Plan. In the process of updating the plan, all functional areas, with the exception of one, remained with the existing State agency that had been responsible for that function prior to the plan update. The one function that changed was transportation. In our old plan, transportation was the responsibility of the National Guard. In the new

plan, this function was transferred to the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development. The final result of the plan update was that we had equivalent agencies at the State level talking to their Federal counterparts (in this case, Louisiana DOTD talking to the Federal Department of Transportation).

### **Issues Identified in July 2004 that Required Further Discussion**

As I mentioned, it was generally understood at the end of the exercise that we did not have anything close to a 100% answer for a catastrophic event. It was very evident at the end of the week that there were certain groups that still needed to meet for further discussions and dialogue on their plans. During the course of the exercise, it was suggested that we continue this process with some follow-on workshops. It was agreed by the rest of the Unified Command, FEMA Region VI, and the State that this would be a good thing. This led to the development of the follow-on workshops, which I was the lead for, until I left LOHSEP on May 31, 2005. We had the first of these follow-on workshops in late November/early December 2004.

Initially, LOHSEP proposed to FEMA to have a second major planning event like the first Hurricane Pam exercise to focus on some of the areas that we did not get to cover during the first exercise. These areas included Transportation, Communications, Feeding, Security, Financial issues (Banking, Insurance, Cash flow to affected individuals, Postal delivery of financial documents, etc.), Personal records, and Missing Persons/Family Reunification. The Unified Command also felt that External Affairs/Public Relations, which was covered at the first Hurricane Pam exercise, needed additional work.

However, in the meantime, the Steering Committee scheduled a follow-on workshop for late November/early December to focus on continued planning for Sheltering, Housing, and Temporary Medical. These workshop participants took the plans they created during the initial Pam exercise and tried to expand them and fill in the holes that they knew were there by bringing additional information to the table.

During this whole process, there were many delays in the execution of the follow-on planning exercises due to funding issues. These issues were mainly dealing with Federal funding for Federal travel. FEMA funded the State and (to my knowledge) the contractor with end-of-year funds. However, due to Federal budget rules, they could not pay for Federal travel with the same funding, which led to delays for the follow-on workshops.

It became clear after the first follow-on workshop that there would not be another large exercise, due to funding. Therefore, FEMA Region VI and LOHSEP decided to use the 2<sup>nd</sup> follow-on workshop to focus primarily on the Transportation, Staging, and Distribution of Critical Resources plan, because it affected all the other plans one way or another. There was also further discussion of Temporary Housing. In addition, there was supposed to be a follow-on discussion of Temporary Medical Care; however, due to some scheduling conflicts, it wasn't included in the second follow-on workshop. It is my understanding that the medical experts met in a separate workshop in the summer of 2005, but I was no longer with the State at that point, so I don't know what came out of that workshop. Although I came to work for the Hurricane Pam exercise contractor



(IEM), I recused myself from any Hurricane Pam follow-on activities due to my previous State responsibilities, in line with counsel I received from the Louisiana State Ethics Board.

In discussions at Hurricane Pam and the follow-on workshops, one of the things the participants realized in the Temporary Housing arena (and in some of the other instances) was that the Stafford Act was not capable of handling a disaster of this magnitude. Some of us felt that changes needed to be made to FEMA policies regarding some of these issues. Another example was the rules for the Public Assistance (PA) Program as they related to schools. There was a need to help schools outside the affected area because their costs doubled when their student populations doubled overnight. There are no rules in the PA program covering that issue, to my knowledge. We didn't have time to get into the discussion of how to change these policies and rules; the first step was to identify the issues. I always thought this was a discussion we needed to have down the road. But since I left the State and this planning process, I was no longer in that loop.

In spite of the funding, scheduling, and policy challenges we faced with the Southeast Louisiana Catastrophic Planning Project, I felt that we had started down the right path. We still had a way to go, but we were headed in the right direction. It is my opinion that scenario based planning activities, like Hurricane Pam, are the way to go when trying to formulate plans to deal with catastrophic events. The realism that is brought to the table during these events really makes the planning feel more urgent.