



## Summary: House Homeland Security Hearing Hurricane Season Preparedness



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### House Homeland Security Committee *Hearing: The 2007 Hurricane Season – Are We Prepared?* May 15, 2007

The following witnesses presented at the hearing:

#### Panel 1

- Honorable R. David Paulison, Undersecretary, Federal Emergency Management Agency
- William Jenkins, Director, Homeland Security and Justice Issues Division, U.S. Government Accountability Office
- Craig Fugate, Director, Florida Division of Emergency Management
- Joe Becker, Senior Vice President, Preparedness and Response, American Red Cross National Headquarters

#### Hearing Summary:

The hearing opened with a statement from Chairman Bennie Thompson (D-MS) that immediately addressed FEMA's non-compliance with the committee's requirement of testimony to be submitted within 48 hours of the hearing. "We've shared this to the secretary. I know you have significant jurisdictional issues, a lot of committees. We have said we'd work through it. And I understand what other challenges you have before you, but we have some committee rules that we have adopted, and, to the extent practicable, we'd like to see them followed." This set the tone for the hearing.

The 2007 Atlantic hurricane season officially begins on June 1 and will last until November 30. The primary concern is the fact that FEMA still has yet to issue strategy that establishes practices and procedures for coordination among federal, state and local governments. Thompson found this "very disturbing." He further lambasted the agency by stating, "FEMA's response to Hurricane Katrina was abysmal."

FEMA Undersecretary **David Paulison** led the witness testimony. The following are the key points of his testimony:

- FEMA has made steady progress to approve our preparedness posture for the 2007 hurricane season to deliver more effective disaster assistance, not only to individuals but to communities impacted by the disaster.
- FEMA has strengthened relationships with key state and local partners, helping each state analyze their strengths and weaknesses.

- FEMA will be ready to act – there are prearranged contracts, an improving logistics system and other elements that are already in place to expedite our response.
- FEMA is also better prepared to help with the recovery with an expanded disaster assistance directorate that can provide mass care, sheltering, debris removal, victim registration, including enhanced protections against waste, fraud and abuse, and coordination among government and private- sector entities, all moving to provide assistance.
- The National Response Plan (NRP) is in place and ready for any upcoming possibility of disaster or emergency.

After several questions of Undersecretary Paulison, **William Jenkins** of GAO pointed out the following important ideas:

- Well-planned, well-coordinated, and effective disaster preparation and response can save lives and mitigate damage while helping set the stage for recovery.
- Recommends FEMA develop effective partnerships with a wide range of organizations, both government and non-government.
- On the basis of our post-Katrina work, GAO identified three basic areas of focus for FEMA and disaster relief. One, having clear and clearly understood roles and responsibilities. Two, identifying, developing, and maintaining needed capabilities. And three, balancing the need for quick, flexible action with accountability for the use of resources.\
- GAO recommends:
  - the development and implementation of the National Preparedness System, including preparedness for all types of major disasters, natural or man-made
  - needed state and local capabilities and the use of federal grants in building and sustaining those capabilities
  - regional and multistate planning and preparation
  - the role of preparedness exercises in building and maintaining preparedness and response capabilities
  - the transparency of DHS policies and the basis for those policies

Next, **Craig Fugate**, Florida's director of emergency management, who voiced the following concerns:

- Emergency Management Performance Grant, a 50-50 funding program that has been authorized by Congress to build capability and capacity in our communities to share resources, respond effectively, and manage many of those local disasters without state or federal assistance, or, in many disasters, only require federal reimbursement assistance, because we built capacity.
- Emergency Management Assistance Compact, which allows better way of bringing assistance from other states.
- Temporary Disaster Housing Program – need a better way for FEMA and the government at all levels to have a program that provides immediate housing solutions for disaster victims.
- Need to have a better understanding that FEMA's role is the emergency.

The American Red Cross' **Joe Becker** ended the witness testimony highlighting the following:

- The Red Cross provides shelter, food, and items that people need, the supplies that they would need to get through the immediate next few days, as well as give some financial assistance so people can obtain the basics when their economy recovers. Additionally, they provide mental-health counseling.
- FEMA needs to improve on logistics, instate a multiyear preparedness effort and finish the NRP as soon as possible.