

**U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials**

“The Role of Intercity Passenger Rail During National Emergencies”

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Hurricanes Katrina and Rita exposed significant flaws in Federal, State, and local preparedness and response capabilities to catastrophic events. Numerous after-action reviews were conducted in the months following the 2005 hurricanes involving stakeholders at every level of Government. Beginning in 2006 a concerted effort has been made by the State of Louisiana in a cooperative spirit with local governments, including non-governmental organizations, industry, and our Federal partners to formulate improved planning, coordination, and disaster management capabilities during future incidents.

One such lesson learned was the need to develop scalable and flexible plans with adequate resources to assist those citizens who desire to evacuate during an emergency, but lack the means to do so. The City of New Orleans has developed a “New Orleans City Assisted Evacuation Plan” that addresses this very issue. It is estimated that if an evacuation is called, approximately 25,000 citizens could potentially require emergency transportation out of the New Orleans area within a 54 hour window.

It is clearly evident that to evacuate that number of citizens in such a short time period every available means of transportation had to be considered. The State Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD), who has the primary responsibility for Emergency Support Function (ESF) 1 – Transportation, has secured a commercial bus contract for 700 coach buses. These commercial buses in addition to State school buses will provide a large percentage of the critical transportation needs for citizens that require both transportation and sheltering across all of the at-risk parishes in Louisiana. We are aware and do currently have concerns that the contracted bus vendors, depending on the situation, may not be able to provide the total number of buses when and where needed in Louisiana. Those citizens considered “general population” evacuees that do avail themselves of this means of transportation can expect a rather long trip (approximately 5 to 10 hours) to the shelters located in North Louisiana or to neighboring States such as Arkansas or Alabama.

New Orleans emergency management officials suggested in 2006 that we consider Amtrak as a transportation asset that could be used for senior citizens and individuals that may require some special assistance. The emphasis is to place these citizens in a low stress environment to minimize the psychological and physical impact that occurs during a high tension event. The concept was discussed and refined and a request was made from the State to FEMA to formally ask for the use of this asset. Negotiations between FEMA and Amtrak produced a signed contract to be triggered in the event a Category 3 storm or higher threatens the City of New Orleans. A Memorandum of Agreement was signed between Louisiana and the State of Mississippi to allow the trains to use the Jackson train station as a trans-load site. At that point evacuees from the train would transfer to commercial buses which would take the evacuees to shelters located back in North Louisiana.

In 2007 the plan was modified to transport ambulatory senior citizen evacuees to Memphis where the State of Tennessee has agreed to shelter up to 6,000 Louisiana citizens arriving by train. Two Amtrak trains (each train consisting of 24 rail cars) carrying 1500 citizens with limited wheelchair capability would make 2 trips each from New Orleans to Memphis starting at 48 hours prior to the projected onset of tropical force winds (referred to as H-48).

During hurricane season, the speed at which some storms develop may not allow State and Federal entities to activate their transportation support plans in time to be effective. Air and bus assets must be activated as early as H-100 hours in order to maximize their potential effectiveness. Amtrak, with its pre-staged transportation resources in the vicinity, could make an immediate impact in this type of environment.

The use of rail is an integral part of the overall transportation evacuation plan in Louisiana. It was identified early in the planning process for an evacuation of Critical Transportation Needs (CTN) citizens within the Southeastern parishes of Louisiana which includes New Orleans, as the use of bus and rail alone will not provide the necessary transportation resources required. As a result of this potential shortfall a plan was developed by FEMA for the use of air assets to supplement bus and rail to transport as many as 15-20,000 evacuees out of the State.

All of the planning for the 2007 Gulf Coast Hurricane Season was focused on New Orleans as the origin rail station and Memphis as the destination rail station. During one of the hurricanes this past season as both Louisiana and Texas at one point were being threatened simultaneously, Texas inquired about the potential use of emergency rail transportation services for their general population. Due to the lack of prior planning this option was not pursued. There is a need for a coordinated national emergency transportation plan.

Our recommendation is that FEMA pursue a regional rail evacuation concept with a flexible multiple origins and destinations contract with Amtrak that is in line with FEMA Regions responsibilities and Amtrak's capabilities. There are other variables that could impact having only one origin or destination and without prior pre-planning for other options it could reduce Amtrak's capabilities. By planning different scenarios, FEMA and the States will be better prepared for any unusual situation that could disrupt operations. We see this as giving FEMA and the States a broad scope of coverage for emergency rail evacuation to compliment their multi – state responsibilities. As we continue preparations for the upcoming 2008 Hurricane Season, Louisiana will once again be requesting through FEMA an Amtrak contract.