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# "Post-Katrina: What it Takes to Cut the Bureaucracy and Assure a More Rapid Response After a Catastrophic Disaster"

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Good morning Chairwoman Norton, Ranking Member Diaz-Balart, and other distinguished Members of the committee. It is my privilege to appear before you today on behalf of the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). As always, we appreciate your interest in, and continued support of our emergency management mission.

The subject of today's hearing - catastrophic disasters - is one that has my complete attention. As a former state emergency management director who has dealt with a number of major disaster events, including four back-to-back hurricanes in a single year, I am well aware of the immense response and recovery challenges likely to face those affected by an incident of catastrophic magnitude, and recognize that such an event will require immediate, massive, and sustained support from not only the federal government, but our many partners across the emergency management community. However, while the enormous scale and complexity of a catastrophic disaster environment will require an equally enormous level of support, our number one priority - saving and sustaining lives – remains constant no matter the scale of the crisis.

But, first things first. Before we can engage in a productive dialogue on the role of the federal government in a catastrophic incident environment, we first must agree on what a catastrophic disaster is.

Our nation's guide to disaster response is the National Response Framework, which establishes principles and a scalable architecture for responding to incidents of any size or magnitude, including catastrophes, which the Framework defines as "any natural

or manmade incident, including terrorism, that results in extraordinary levels of mass casualties, damage, or disruption severely affecting the population, infrastructure, environment, economy, national morale, and/or government functions." In starker terms, a catastrophe is an event of such magnitude that it overwhelms local incident command and resource capabilities across the state, and does so to such an extent that the health, safety, and security of thousands of citizens may be at risk without swift and aggressive intervention and assistance from the federal government and our national partners. Further, a catastrophe is likely to result in such widespread devastation that communities will face immediate or near-term insolvency, and will be incapable of reconstitution without significant financial and materiel assistance from the federal government. The economic and social reverberations of such an event have the potential to be far-reaching.

You may notice that I am describing a catastrophe within the context of its effects on the homes, infrastructure, and local economy of the region it impacts. We seem to most often talk about disaster assistance from a federal-state perspective, but it is within *communities* that people actually live and work; within *communities* that businesses and industries actually operate; and within *communities* that local governments and government institutions reside. While the impact of catastrophes will certainly be felt at the federal and state level, the impacts have the potential to be most devastating at the community level. Therefore, our catastrophic response strategy must be designed to quickly stabilize communities, and calibrated to support their timely recovery and return to municipal self-sufficiency.

A key component of the National Response Framework is the Catastrophic Incident Annex, which states, "Where State, tribal, or local governments are unable to

establish or maintain an effective incident command structure due to catastrophic conditions, the Federal Government, at the direction of the Secretary of Homeland Security, may establish a unified command structure, led by the Unified Coordination Group, to save lives, protect property, maintain operation of critical infrastructure/key resources, contain the event, and protect national security. The Federal Government shall transition to its role of coordinating and supporting the State, tribal, or local government when they are capable of reestablishing their incident command." This is an important and critical element of our catastrophic response strategy, and fully aligned with FEMA's philosophy for providing disaster assistance: Designed to Support, But Prepared to Lead.

Key to our ability to effectively and seamlessly make the shift from traditional support to States to incident command is planning and exercising. All of us in the national response partnership must clearly understand our respective contingency roles and responsibilities within a catastrophic disaster environment, and we must all be prepared to step into and execute those roles and responsibilities immediately, with little to no notice. How well we execute our assigned roles and responsibilities following an event with catastrophic potential, whether man made or natural disaster, the first 72-hour period following the onset will largely define how successful we are in terms of our most important measure: lives saved.

**Planning for Catastrophic Disasters**

The magnitude and scope of a catastrophic event makes the already difficult task of disaster planning even more challenging. Traditional disaster planning is based on the theory of sequential failure. When a city or county's resources are overwhelmed, it turns

to the state government for assistance. If the state is overwhelmed, it in turn seeks aid from other states and/or the federal government. When directed to provide such support by the President, FEMA will coordinate with its federal partners to provide assistance to, and through, the State, within the existing incident command framework.

A catastrophic event may overwhelm not only local response capabilities, but overwhelm the state emergency management infrastructure as well. A catastrophic event may become a multiregional or international event requiring a regionally consistent response. In such cases, the federal government must be prepared to step in and assume a greater and more direct role during the initial disaster mitigation and disaster response period. To help define the federal government's roles and responsibilities in these situations, FEMA initiated a Catastrophic Disaster Planning Initiative designed to plan and prepare for an appropriate, timely, and efficient response to a truly catastrophic disaster—and to test and practice such plans with our state and federal partners.

To give just a few examples of locations where such planning is underway:

In Florida, emergency plans have been developed for all inland counties that surround Lake Okeechobee, and catastrophic plan annexes and standard operating procedures are being developed for Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties. Going forward, the intent is to integrate these new policies into comprehensive emergency management plans, and to apply any lessons from this effort to our current and future catastrophic planning initiatives.

Last year, an earthquake response plan was completed for Northern California and the San Francisco Bay Area. This plan was tested during the recent "Golden Guardian" exercises, and a similar plan is now being developed for Southern California. This plan

addresses the unique challenges that would be associated with responding to a massive, catastrophic earthquake on the west coast.

In Hawaii, a catastrophic response plan was developed and tested during a 2009 exercise. A major focus of this planning effort involved the challenge of providing rapid large-scale disaster relief to the geographically isolated state. FEMA's catastrophic planning efforts are now beginning to focus on similar challenges in Guam.

Another major planning effort underway focuses on the New Madrid Seismic Zone in the Midwest States. This planning initiative will address a catastrophic earthquake impacting eight Midwest States, and will be tested during the 2011 National-Level Exercise. It is our intention that this New Madrid plan will provide the basis for a fundamental re-tooling of the all-hazards Catastrophic Incident Annex and associated supplement to the National Response Framework.

In addition to our planning and grant funding efforts, FEMA regularly participates with states in National Level Exercises to ensure that all governments are coordinating and ready to respond to any type of disaster, including a catastrophic event. The upcoming national exercise in 2010, for instance, will have a particular emphasis on Clark County, Nevada, where the scenario focuses on the detonation of an improvised nuclear device.

These national exercises reflect the reality that neighboring states are often in a better position than the federal government to provide immediate assistance to a devastated community. That is why FEMA has placed a greater emphasis on Pre-Scripted Mission Assignments for adjoining states and the execution of contracts that can help us strengthen our partnerships and ensure a rapid response to any disaster. We are

also working with the National Emergency Management Association to encourage collaborative partnerships between states, and will continue to work to provide clear and simple guidance regarding reimbursement to States under the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, as well as interstate mutual aid agreements.

In addition to these initiatives, FEMA is using our Regional Catastrophic Preparedness Grant Program to support the coordination of regional, all-hazard planning for catastrophic events, and the planning for pre-positioned commodities and equipment. The benefits of this program are visible throughout the country. For example, New York City has used Regional Catastrophic Preparedness Grant Program funding to partner with communities in Northern New Jersey to develop specific, regional catastrophic plans for evacuation and sheltering, responses to terrorists' use of explosives, regional infrastructure protection, mass fatalities, and debris management. They have also used the funds to develop a comprehensive, regional disaster-housing plan. In many cases, the assets best positioned to respond in a catastrophic event will be those located nearest to the impacted communities, making this regional level planning invaluable.

**New Realities Call For New Solutions**

Business as usual will not work in a catastrophic disaster. In a catastrophe, we will be faced with situations and needs for which our traditional response and recovery architecture is insufficient. Rather than defining our response based on current capabilities, we must work with our partners across federal, state and local governments – and importantly, in the in the private and volunteer sectors – to identify new approaches to deal with novel events such as anthrax or other biological attacks, massive destruction

or contamination across a wide geographic area. The focus will be on attending to the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people needing immediate medical care, diagnosis and treatment. However, one other area that will demand a new approach is disaster shelter planning.

While FEMA is certainly prepared to provide a large number of temporary housing resources following a disaster, the sheer size, scope, nature and duration of the sheltering needs after a catastrophic event require us to look at alternatives, and will require the coordinated involvement of federal agencies, state, local and tribal governments, the private sector, and voluntary and faith-based groups. As I noted in recent testimony before another House committee, disaster housing, particularly following a catastrophic event, is not a mission that FEMA can or will ever be able to effectively handle alone. However, it is a mission to which FEMA is committed to providing national leadership.

The emergency management community has developed several very real, potential catastrophic scenarios, and the number of potential disaster survivors that may need sheltering and housing is enormous. For example, planning experts anticipate that following a New Madrid Seismic Zone no-notice earthquake, a projected 2.6 million people will require shelter. It is also estimated that following a Category 5 Hurricane in the most populous areas of Florida, as many as 3.6 million households will seek either short- or long-term shelter. After a catastrophic hurricane affecting Honolulu and the island of Oahu, it is projected that 650,000 residents would be in need of shelter.

These numbers can increase significantly due to the unknowns - significant aftershocks, ensuing fires, safety and security concerns, additional significant weather

conditions that could affect population movements, and temporary sheltering requirements dependent on seasonal weather conditions. The bottom line is that neither the federal government nor the manufactured housing industry has the capacity to address all the anticipated housing needs in a timely manner in these types of situations. Because of this, we will need to rely on other, more innovative housing options.

Although our first priority is always to shelter and house survivors in or near their communities, that will simply not be possible in a truly catastrophic event or an event involving contamination. While we continue to aggressively explore options to quickly provide or restore housing in affected areas, the capability will simply never exist to locally shelter and temporarily house half a million or more survivors. Instead, we all need to recognize the need for a timely, organized, and disciplined relocation of survivors to venues where such shelter and follow-on temporary housing exists. The reality is that, if a region is sufficiently devastated by a catastrophic disaster, it may be many months or years before recovery has progressed to the point many disaster survivors will be able to return to their homes and communities. Accordingly, we must temporarily place survivors in environments conducive to personal stabilization and recovery *where they are*, as their communities are rebuilt. Other options that must be considered include rehabilitating rental units that can be repaired quickly, similar to the efforts undertaken by FEMA in Iowa and Texas under a recent pilot program authorized by the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act's Rental Repair Pilot Program. This legislation also gave FEMA additional authorities to undertake semi-permanent and permanent construction work to make repairs.

We must also look at ways to speed up the infusion of eligible public assistance funding to communities, which can be financially devastated and thus unable to commence critical infrastructure repair projects without up-front funding. Spurring timely recovery at the community level will send a powerful message of hope to community disaster survivors, as well as create jobs that may prove crucial in keeping many residents in those communities. I firmly believe that we can make our public assistance program less process-oriented and more outcome-driven, and we are working toward exactly that. We are also working with our federal partners to improve the delivery of additional federal long-term recovery assistance.

**Personal and Community Preparedness**

While FEMA can and is making improvements to how we plan, organize, and respond in a catastrophic disaster, there remains one area of improvement that still needs considerable national attention: personal preparedness. Studies continue to indicate that far too many households do not have personal disaster plans that include provisions for assuring the self-sufficiency of their households for up to 72 hours following a disaster. A family should also think through personal preparedness plans in case of a catastrophic event that devastates their city. In fact, a recent survey found that only half of Americans have put together an emergency kit, and less than half – only 40 percent – have created a family emergency plan. I cannot emphasize enough just how problematic this could prove in a catastrophic environment, not only to the households, but to the efficacy of the overall incident management effort. Every family that fails to take even the most basic preparedness actions, such as having sufficient water and non-perishable

food to support the family for at least 72, is a family that will pull responders and critical resources away from those who truly need such assistance, both the casualties of the disaster, and our most vulnerable populations, such as persons with disabilities and children.

I've said it time and time again, and I will continue to say it: personal disaster preparedness is and must be a national priority, and every elected and appointed official at every level of government must make it a priority. Nothing will contribute more to saving and sustaining lives than a citizenry prepared and provisioned to live in a reduced-services environment in the days immediately following a catastrophic disaster. When basic infrastructure at the community level halts, as should be anticipated in a catastrophic event, the value of personal preparedness cannot be overestimated. Neighbors are almost always the most effective and most immediate first responders – never more so than when local first response assets have been impacted by the same catastrophic event.

Having a family disaster plan, keeping supplies for basic survival needs, and staying informed are the responsibility of every American. By being prepared, you can help your family and your community weather the initial hours and days following a catastrophic event and free up our first responders to help those who cannot help themselves.

We also have a responsibility, as a government, to make sure that our plans for response and recovery, to the extent possible, address the needs of the most vulnerable residents, and do not overlook citizens based on age, economics, or other factors such as disabilities. In catastrophic planning, as in all of our planning, we need to ensure we

include measures that directly address the unique needs of children, the elderly, the disabled, and any other groups that might face unique challenges in a disaster environment. The needs of these groups must be understood prior to an event and worked into the fabric of our overall response and recovery plans, not merely treated as an afterthought to pre-existing plans and procedures.

**Conclusion**

An incident of catastrophic proportions has the potential to imperil thousands of people, devastate hundreds of communities, and produce far-reaching economic and social effects. The scope of needs will be large, immediate, novel and profound, and the entire national emergency management, public health, security, law enforcement, critical infrastructure, medical and all other components that make up community must be prepared to respond, and respond in ways that lie outside the normal paradigms in which we traditionally operate.

I recognize that we need to take our planning and preparedness to a new level, and have charged my new leadership at FEMA to do exactly that. But again, effectively enabling mitigation and responding to catastrophes is not something FEMA can do alone. Organizations at every level of government, as well as those within the private and voluntary sectors, must make major investments in time and preparation. And given that these types of disasters are rare and tend to overwhelm local and state governments, our nation's citizens and families must recognize and embrace their own responsibilities to be prepared, and take the actions necessary to assure that they are.

Thank you, Madam Chairwoman, we look forward to working with the committee as we continue to improve our preparedness for the challenges of a catastrophic disaster. I look forward to your questions.