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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM
2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

Majority (202) 225-6051
Minority (202) 225-6074

Statement of Rep. Tom Davis
Ranking Republican Member
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
"FEMA's Preparedness for the Next Major Disaster"
July 31, 2007

Good morning. Before embarking on their summer travels, every American family kicks the tires, checks the oil and makes sure their vehicle is ready for the road. Before Congress heads home for the August recess, it's important we do the same – check under the hood of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the vehicle meant to carry us safely through the hazards in our path.

Disasters are indiscriminate, completely nonpartisan, purveyors of devastation and grief. Reflecting that hard reality, this hearing is also a nonpartisan review of FEMA's readiness to perform its vital mission. Chairman Waxman and Domestic Policy Subcommittee Chairman Kucinich agreed with our requests to continue the Committee's active oversight of post-Katrina preparedness issues. We appreciate their working with us to frame this hearing as a constructive examination of reforms underway at FEMA.

Hurricane Katrina laid bare devastating dysfunction in the nation's catastrophic response capabilities. We saw critical failures in essential response functions – personnel, planning, logistics, communications, and fiscal stewardship. The Select Committee on Katrina, which I chaired, produced 90 substantive findings to guide the reform and restoration of national emergency systems. A White House report made 125 recommendations. The Administration acknowledged the need to strengthen FEMA and untangle the crossed wires that left states and localities wondering who was in charge and when needed help would arrive.

Many attributed FEMA's problems to the organizational and fiscal price the agency paid when it was merged into the Department of Homeland Security. Preparedness programs were separate from response planning. Logistics systems atrophied. Budget constraints took a toll. Key personnel with essential skills and institutional memory left. And communication with state and local stakeholders got muddled passing through layers of bureaucratic filters. Some of us thought FEMA had to be independent again, liberated from a strangling "all terrorism" myopia at DHS and empowered once again to pursue a proven "all hazards" approach.

To cure what the Select Committee characterized as “A Failure of Initiative,” Congress enacted The Post Katrina Emergency Reform Act so future catastrophes would trigger a far more pro-active, robust, and coordinated response to those in need of help. The “new FEMA” to emerge, although not fully independent, was to be autonomous enough within DHS to take charge when disaster struck. Preparedness grants and training were brought back home to FEMA. Pre-positioning plans and logistics systems were modernized. Lines of authority and accountability were clarified.

Today we take a timely look at how those reforms are being implemented and what still might prevent FEMA from functioning effectively as the nation’s trusted agent and premiere catalyst for disaster preparation, response and mitigation. As we head into the heart of what is still predicted to be a very active hurricane season, we see troubling signs that key reforms have not yet taken hold and that FEMA may still be hobbled within the larger DHS structure.

Specifically, lines of authority still seem blurred and local officials remain frustrated over high-handed, indecisive and slow answers from Washington – when they get any answers at all. The recent appointment of Principal Federal Officials and Federal Coordinating Officers by Secretary Chertoff appears to have bypassed FEMA altogether. Governors were told to direct any questions about these key positions to a DHS directorate not even in the emergency response chain of command. The new logistics system may not be ready for prime time. And the Government Accountability Office reports FEMA still lacks a strategic workforce plan and related human capital strategy to attract and retain the right people with the requisite skills and experience to sustain effective response operations.

These are all indications DHS may again be following what one of today’s witnesses cites as the “spare tire theory” of emergency management. Under that discredited premise, disaster response capabilities can be left locked away and forgotten on the assumption they will work just fine when we need them. But when Katrina struck, and we dug FEMA out from under all the terrorism manuals in DHS’ trunk, those critical tools had gone dull and flat from neglect. That can’t happen again. Like maintaining the family sedan, keeping the nation’s emergency response vehicle running requires regular lubrication and frequent road tests.

Today’s oversight hearing is our part of the new FEMA’s maintenance program. I join the Chairman in welcoming our witnesses. We look forward to their testimony and to a candid discussion of our nation’s readiness to overcome the predictable, and the unexpected, hazards on the road ahead.