

Opening statement of U.S. Rep. Sam Graves (R-MO), Ranking Republican on the Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management Subcommittee, from today's hearing entitled "Readiness in the Post-Katrina and Post-9/11 World: Evaluation of the New National Response Framework."

"Thank you, Madam Chair for holding today's hearing on the federal government's disaster readiness and the revised National Response Plan.

"Today's hearing is important for a couple of reasons. First, we need to know if the experts believe the Department has produced a good plan. Will it work? And if not, how should it be improved?

"As we saw during Hurricane Katrina, a confusing response plan or a plan that is poorly implemented can have tragic consequences for those struck by disaster.

"The House of Representatives' Katrina Committee – on which our former Chairman Bill Shuster served – identified a few serious problems with the National Response Plan.

"Most significantly the plan did not enable the President to get the professional disaster advice he needed during the disaster, it created new positions which confused the chain of command, and it did not result in a proactive federal response when one was clearly needed.

"The second important reason for today's hearing is the National Response Framework is the first major document produced by the Department since Congress passed the FEMA reform bill last year.

"It's our first opportunity to see how well the Department is implementing the near unanimous reforms recommended by the major stakeholders.

"The FEMA reform bill required several changes to the National Response Plan that were based on the Katrina Committee's findings and the professional recommendations of almost every first responder association.

"Most importantly the reform bill placed the responsibility and authority for managing all aspects of an incident under FEMA, and it required the Administrator to have professional emergency management and homeland security qualifications.

"This means the Administrator has primary responsibility for:

- Preparedness – including planning, training, and exercises;
- Response – including managing and coordinating the federal response;
- Recovery – including individual assistance and infrastructure reconstruction; and
- Mitigation – including reducing the consequences of future disasters.

“The FEMA reform bill also made the Administrator the principal emergency management advisor to the President and the primary federal official responsible for managing and coordinating the federal response to disasters.

“Insofar as the National Response Framework allocates roles and responsibilities within the government, it provides an insight into the actual role DHS has assigned to FEMA after enactment of the FEMA reform bill.

“With respect to the National Response Plan, the FEMA reform bill specifically required the plan be changed to reflect the operational role of the Administrator, to account for the unique requirements of a catastrophic disaster, and to clarify that the Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) – and not the Principal Federal Official (PFO) – is responsible for coordinating the federal response in the field.

“Given the specific changes to the National Response Plan mandated by law, I find it particularly surprising the new plan does not mention the FEMA reform bill at all. Perhaps that helps explain why FEMA and the FEMA Administrator are barely mentioned and the Administrator is given no operational role in the plan.

“I am not raising this issue because the FEMA reform bill came from this committee or that it has to be done our way. I say this because these aspects of the bill were key recommendations of the major first responder and stakeholder groups.

“We have letters from the emergency management, fire services, law enforcement, city, county, state and other professional associations calling for these specific reforms. These are the reforms the professionals thought necessary to fix a broken system at DHS.

“A properly constructed response plan should define the roles and responsibilities of the agencies involved, explain how decisions will be made, and clarify who is in charge.

“Given the critical testimony of our expert witnesses and our committee’s own review, it appears the Department has a lot more work to develop an effective National Response Plan.

“Thank you again Madam Chair for holding today’s hearing, and I look forward to the testimony of our distinguished witnesses.”

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