

Chairman James Oberstar's comments on H.R. 2775 to Authorize Funding for Emergency Management Performance Grants and Other Purposes

From today's full committee markup, regarding the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act --- includes his comments to the amendment in the nature of a substitute

June 28, 2007

Today, the Committee considers H.R. 2775, a bill to authorize funding and provide statutory reinforcement for the Emergency Management Performance Grant ("EMPG") program.

EMPG is the Federal Government's principle program to build the capability of state and local governments to prepare for, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards. Administered by the Federal Emergency Management Administration ("FEMA"), EMPG is truly a partnership between the Federal Government and state and local governments that has withstood the test of time. This grant program has been in existence, under different names, since the 1950s.

Terrorism poses a grave threat to our nation. Yet our country faces and responds to the threats of natural hazards far more frequently. While the terror of Katrina is still fresh in our memories, our nation faces smaller-scale natural disasters every day. Just last month, a region of my district was devastated by a threat that started in the U.S., and then roared across the Canadian border: not a terrorist attack, but a 75,000 acre forest fire.

Despite the risk that our country faces from all hazards, EMPG receives a fraction of the amount spent annually by the Federal Government for terrorism-specific programs. In April, the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management held a hearing on programs related to preparedness for all hazards. The hearing revealed that in FY 2006, EMPG received only about 10 percent of the funding allocated to terrorism preparedness programs.

EMPG has a long, successful history of fostering true preparedness capabilities at the state and local level. The program requires a non-Federal share of 50 percent, but state and local governments overmatch Federal funds by approximately \$96 million each year. This 50-percent cost share is specifically designed to require state and local governments to contribute their resources to building strong emergency management capabilities.

Recently, the Administration has sought to undermine and undo the EMPG program, by proposing changes that stand to gut the core all hazards nature of the program. The Administration proposed in its FY 2008 Budget request that EMPG should be combined with terrorism programs. I am pleased that the FY 2008 Homeland Security Appropriations bill, passed by the House this month, rejected this misguided proposal and

funds EMPG as a separate program. The Committee on Appropriations recognized the importance of the EMPG program as “the one true all-hazard sources of funding for emergency managers,” as stated in the Committee report.

In the same manner that Congress must wall off and protect the appropriation for EMPG, we must act to reinforce this program through an authorization.

In the pre-conference negotiations on H.R. 1, Implementing the 9/11 Commission Recommendations, much attention has been focused on the EMPG program. The Senate version of this bill (S. 4), authorizes the EMPG program, but in a manner in which the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) could use its administrative authority to turn EMPG into yet another terrorism preparedness program. This shift would undercut all-hazards preparedness, and place States in danger of not being ready for natural disasters and other non-terrorism hazards, which are significantly, even drastically, more likely to occur.

H.R. 2775 authorizes the EMPG program in the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (“Stafford Act”). The Stafford Act is the natural and historic home for this program, and the program derives its authority from this Act. The authority to prepare for all hazards must be kept together with the authority to respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards, which is found in the Stafford Act.

The bill authorizes over \$1 billion for Fiscal Years 2009 through 2011 for the Administrator of FEMA to continue to implement the EMPG program. Section 2 of the bill, amends an existing provision in section 614 of the Stafford Act, concerning the Federal share for construction of Emergency Operations Centers (“EOC”). This allows the Federal Government to pay for up to 75 percent of the construction of State or local EOCs.

Our Committee has received strong support from state and local emergency managers on this bill. I have received a number of calls from emergency managers in Minnesota. We also have letters of support from the International Association of Emergency Managers (local and county emergency management officials) and the National Emergency Management Association (state emergency management officials.) I ask for unanimous consent that those letters be added to the record. Without objection, so ordered.

One of the key lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina is that separating the programs and organizations that prepare for disasters from the rest of the emergency management system leads to sluggish and ineffective response. Recognizing this mistake, Congress (over the objections of the Administration) reunited preparedness with the rest of emergency management functions in FEMA at the end of the 109th Congress, by passing the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act. Authorizing the EMPG program under the Stafford Act, linked to the other emergency management programs, is consistent with these goals.

I strongly urge my colleagues to support this bill.

(more)

OBERSTAR AMENDMENT IN THE NATURE OF A SUBSTITUTE

JUNE 28, 2007

The amendment in the nature of a substitute makes three minor changes to H.R. 2775, as introduced.

The amendment increases the authorization of appropriations for fiscal year 2009 to \$450 million from \$400 million. This change establishes a level of funding for FY 2009 that is in line with the total national need for EMPG funds, as determined by emergency managers.

The amendment also includes a new provision in Section 1 that guarantees that no State will receive in any year fewer EMPG funds than the State received in Fiscal Year 2007, provided that the appropriation for that year equals or exceeds the Fiscal Year 2007 appropriation.

The amendment further clarifies that the cost share for emergency operations centers applies to grants made to States for State or local Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs). Section 2 of the bill applies not only to the EMPG program but to any program authorized under Title VI of the Stafford Act that would provide grants for construction of Emergency Operations Centers.

I urge my colleagues to support the amendment.

###