

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 28, 2006

LIEBERMAN SPEAKS ON INTRODUCTION OF BILL TO REINVENT FEMA

WASHINGTON – Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Ranking Member Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., delivered the following statement on the Senate floor Wednesday upon introduction of the U.S. Emergency Management Authority Act of 2006:

Mr. President, I am pleased to join with Chairman Collins today to speak in favor of the legislation we are introducing to reinvent FEMA into an agency capable of responding effectively to a catastrophe the size and scope of Hurricane Katrina but also to the natural disasters in the normal course of events that have effected and will effect the American people. The Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee spent seven months last year and into this year investigating the failed government response to that hurricane. Our report recounts a double tragedy of epic proportions – a tragedy caused by nature and compounded by human folly and the failure of leadership. We found government at all levels – from the federal government to the local government, from the White House to FEMA to the governor’s office in Louisiana to the mayor’s office in New Orleans – unprepared, even though the hurricane and its affect on the New Orleans levee system had been long predicted. Likewise, all levels of government were unequipped to deal with the human suffering that followed the storm’s landfall and galvanized the attention and ultimately produced the enormous embarrassment and anger of the American people as we watched our fellow Americans suffering on the Gulf coast without the support they have the right to expect from their government. These failings were caused by negligence, lack of resources, lack of capability, but most of all, a lack of leadership starting at the very top. We cannot legislate leadership. But we can

legislate bold changes at the federal level that are critical for our nation to develop the capacity necessary to protect our people in times of disaster whether natural or terrorist. So, we made a number of recommendations, on a bipartisan basis, about what was needed to improve our preparations, response, and recovery the next time disaster strikes, as it surely will. One of our recommendations – was to rebuild FEMA into a more powerful, better-managed, better integrated, better supported organization. Our recommendation was to give the reinvented FEMA, for the first time in its history, the authority and muscle to respond to natural disasters and to catastrophes in the way the American people expect their federal government to respond – with speed, with efficiency and with effect. We would call this new organization the United States Emergency Management Authority (USEMA). But no matter what you call it, this organization, we have concluded, must be in the Department of Homeland Security, in fact must be at the core of the Department – just as FEMA was originally intended to be when we proposed the new department in 2002, based on the recommendations of the Hart-Rudman Commission the previous year. The legislation we are introducing today is the first step in this process. Chairman Collins and I expect to introduce soon a broader bill that will encompass all of our report’s key recommendations. But we begin today by rejoining the functions of disaster response with disaster preparedness within a new USEMA. Our investigation of Hurricane Katrina made it clear to us that preparedness and response are two sides of the same coin. In the years before Katrina, FEMA, the agency charged with coordinating our nation’s response to terrorist attacks or natural disasters, too often was out of the loop when critical decisions about how to prepare – such as how to spend billions of dollars in grants – were made. Exercises were designed and held without serious input by FEMA. FEMA’s ability to respond was crippled because it was not central to preparedness, and thus did not have the close relationships needed with state and local officials on the front lines. The preparers and the responders need to be working hand in hand with state and local officials, other federal agencies, and the private and non-profit sectors if both functions are to work as well as we expect them to. Our legislation first and foremost will ensure that our preparedness efforts are closely linked, inseparable from the capabilities we need to respond. Our investigation also made clear that part of FEMA’s problem during Hurricane Katrina was that it was an agency weakened by years of budget and staff cuts. At the time the hurricane made landfall, FEMA had been operating with a 15 percent vacancy rate for over a year. And it had a senior political management largely without emergency management experience. We address these problems by giving the new authority a special status within the Department of Homeland Security – the same special status the Coast Guard and Secret Service now have. With this status, changes to the agency’s

functions and assets can only be made through statute. Furthermore, we would require that the Administrator and other key officials have the necessary experience and qualifications to get the job done. USEMA will not be plagued by unqualified appointees like FEMA has been. The Chairman and I also believe FEMA is too Washington-oriented and too disconnected from the real work of preparing for disasters where they actually occur, so we envision a rebuilt agency with robust regional offices to focus on preparedness and response coordination with local and state agencies. Each regional office would house a permanent “strike team” that would include representatives from other federal agencies involved in emergency response to ensure the Feds are familiar with regional threats and with state and local emergency personnel. I know some of my colleagues believe FEMA should be removed from DHS and given the full independent status it once had. But Senator Collins and I know this is not the solution. Removing the agency from the Department will only create additional problems. It would be like removing the Army from the Department of Defense. The USEMA, the government’s chief response agency, must have access to the vast resources of the Department of Homeland Security and it needs to work seamlessly with the other agencies that have critical roles to play during catastrophes. The Coast Guard, which performed so admirably during Katrina, might need to be activated. The Department’s communications capabilities, law enforcement, intelligence offices, and infrastructure protection will all be needed in response to a catastrophe. In other words, the federal response must be integrated and that will occur if all agencies have a history of working together within the same Department, if the officials know one another, and if they ultimately serve the same Secretary of Homeland Security. Furthermore, taking FEMA out of DHS would create more and duplicative bureaucracy. DHS would have to develop its own response capabilities. FEMA would have to develop its own preparedness capabilities. And both would need to have tools for obtaining situational awareness. We do not have the resources to waste on that kind of duplication. Returning FEMA to an independent agency is not a guarantee that it will be competent. Even when it was independent, FEMA never did develop the capabilities needed to respond to a catastrophe like Katrina. In fact, its response to Hurricane Andrew in 1992 – a much smaller storm, killing about 50 people compared to Katrina’s 1,500 — was a disaster in itself, leading the Government Accounting Office to conclude that it had “serious doubts about whether FEMA is capable of responding to catastrophic disasters.” The agency did improve subsequent to Hurricane Andrew but never had the ability to respond to a storm like Katrina. The desperate conditions of Gulf Coast communities in the week after Katrina’s landfall shocked the country. There are many other American communities that are similarly vulnerable – whether to a natural disaster or to terrorist attack. The next catastrophe is coming. We know that. We also know

there are significant flaws in the nation's readiness. We can't afford another response like the one to Katrina. Our proposal is not about fiddling with bureaucratic flow charts or re-branding, or rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. It is about plugging the gash in the hull, and building a better deck. It's about saving people's lives by bringing together the skills, resources, missions, and authority for effective preparedness and response to catastrophes when local and state agencies are overwhelmed by a terror attack or a natural disaster. I ask my colleagues for their support of this legislation. And I ask unanimous consent that the full text of the bill be reprinted into the record. Thank you.