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SENATE HOMELAND SECURITY COMMITTEE HOLDS HURRICANE KATRINA HEARING TO EXAMINE LEVEES IN NEW ORLEANS

WASHINGTON, DC– As part of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee's in-depth investigation into preparedness for and response to Hurricane Katrina, Chairman Susan Collins and Ranking Member Joseph Lieberman today held a fifth hearing focusing on why the levees in New Orleans failed. During today's hearing, a preliminary report by the National Science Foundation and the American Society of Engineers was released. The report found that some of the failures were caused by human error in the design of the levees.

Expert witnesses described their investigation into why the levees in New Orleans failed following Hurricane Katrina and provided their assessments about whether it is safe for residents to return to New Orleans. Witnesses included: Ivor Van Heerden, Ph.D., Louisiana Team Leader, Forensic Data Gathering; Paul Mlakar, Ph.D., P.E., Senior Research Scientist, U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center; Raymond B. Seed, Ph.D., Team Leader, National Science Foundation; and Peter Nicholson, Ph.D., Team Leader, Levee Assessment Team, American Society of Civil Engineers.

“Examining why the levees in New Orleans failed following Hurricane Katrina is a crucial part of our committee’s investigation. While some of the flood walls and levees were overtopped, something much more catastrophic happened that was not anticipated. Some of the levees and flood walls failed outright, leaving gaping holes through which water rushed uncontrollably into the neighborhoods of New Orleans,” said Senator Collins. “This flooding caused enormous destruction and tragic loss of life that would not have occurred if the levees had held. The people of New Orleans put their faith in the levee system and unless the cause of this failure is investigated and addressed, New Orleans will remain a city in jeopardy,” Senator Collins added.

Senator Lieberman said, “A lot of the flooding of New Orleans should not have happened, and would not have happened if not for human error and the possibility of malfeasance suggested by one of our witnesses in the design and construction of the city’s levees,” Lieberman said. “Today’s testimony about the inadequacy of the levees to protect the people of New Orleans is as disheartening, as heartbreaking, as infuriating, and ultimately as embarrassing, as the scenes of degradation and despair that we saw in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.”

Both Senators expressed their concern by the fact that the levees were constructed to withstand a category 3 hurricane. But while Katrina was only a category 1 when it hit parts of New Orleans, the levees still failed, causing 80 percent of the city to flood, more than twice as much as would have occurred had the levees held.