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FEMA REINVENTION CLEARS CONGRESS

Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Ranking Member Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., said Friday that Congressional approval of the Department of Homeland Security FY 2007 Appropriations Act would lead to an improved federal emergency response to disasters – whether terrorist attacks or natural catastrophes like Hurricane Katrina.

Contained within the \$34 billion Department of Homeland Security spending bill – expected to be approved by Congress later tonight and sent to the White House for the President’s signature – are a number of proposals Lieberman and Committee Chair Susan Collins, R-Me., recommended following their eight-month investigation into the failed federal preparations for and response to the deadly August 2005 hurricane.

The most prominent recommendation would elevate FEMA to an independent agency within DHS, much like the Coast Guard. The FEMA administrator would be the chief Presidential advisor for emergency management; the administrator and other top regional officials would be required to have emergency management experience; and any agency restructuring would have to be approved by Congress.

“The reinvention of FEMA is a victory for the American people because it will make the federal government more responsive to the specific needs of individual victims of disaster,” Lieberman said. “Hurricane Katrina exposed the hollow shell of our emergency response system. This bill is a step in the right direction toward adding the substance and strength FEMA needs to protect the American public from whatever disasters may strike, whether natural or by the hands of terrorists.”

The measure will:

- Reverse DHS's misguided decision to separate the agency's preparedness and response functions so that the same people are working in a coordinated fashion with state and local officials on both.
- Authorize increased FEMA funding by 10 percent for the next three years.
- Strengthen FEMA's regional task forces so federal and local officials are united in their efforts and familiar with the needs of specific regions.
- Create an Office of Emergency Communications dedicated to helping ensure that first responders and government officials can communicate with each other in a disaster
- Provide additional assistance for individuals and communities that are struck by disaster, including allowing FEMA more flexibility in the types of housing it can provide to disaster victims in order to find more cost-effective alternatives to the widely criticized trailers.
- Require the administrator to appoint a Disability Coordinator to ensure that the needs of the disabled are taken into account in emergency planning and operations.
- Establishes within the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children a center for locating children separated from their families after a disaster, and establishes a voluntary registry to help reunite families separated by a disaster.
- Requires a number of provisions that will help prevent waste, fraud, and abuse.

Lieberman said he regretted that the spending bill does not contain additional post-Katrina recommendations such as funding to enable first responders to achieve interoperable communications networks and additional aid to disaster victims.

Nevertheless, he said, "this begins the process of addressing the tragic shortcomings in our emergency response system exposed by Hurricane Katrina."