

WEDNESDAY, JULY 12, 2006

SENATE APPROVES COLLINS- LIEBERMAN AMENDMENT

A bipartisan amendment offered by Homeland Security Committee Chairman Susan Collins, R-Me., and Ranking Member Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., that will reinvent, protect, and strengthen the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) passed the Senate floor today by a vote of 87 to 11. The amendment to the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations legislation was cosponsored by Senators Trent Lott, R-Miss., and Tom Carper, D-Del., and largely mirrors legislation introduced by Senators Collins and Lieberman two weeks ago, The United States Emergency Management Authority Act of 2006. Specifically, the measure will implement key recommendations of the Committee's Hurricane Katrina Report, A Nation Still Unprepared, and will recreate FEMA as the U.S. Emergency Management Authority (USEMA), reunite its response and preparedness functions, and ensure that the agency remains within the Department of Homeland Security as an independent agency, similar to the current structure of the Coast Guard. This amendment reflects key recommendations of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security's seven-month investigation into the failed preparations and response to Hurricane Katrina, which consisted of 23 hearings, the testimony of 85 witnesses, the texts of more than 325 formal interviews, and the evidence from more than 838,000 pages of documents. Senator Collins said, "This amendment is a significant first step toward implementing the Committee's major recommendations for reforming FEMA. The overarching objective of the amendment is to strengthen FEMA by giving it new authority, new capabilities, and new responsibilities for all-hazards emergency preparedness and response. As last year's tragedy demonstrated, FEMA urgently needs our help to be more effective. Amending the Homeland Security appropriations bill with this

provision will go far to ensuring that we will have a far more effective structure to protect our fellow citizens' lives and livelihoods from disaster. Senator Lieberman said, "We cannot legislate leadership. But we can legislate changes in government structures to make them more sensible and better suited to protecting people in times of disaster. This amendment would literally reinvent FEMA to give our federal emergency preparedness and response experts the authority, capabilities, the resources, and the integration with state and local officials they need to avoid the confused, uncoordinated, and ultimately ineffective response the nation and the world witnessed last August when Hurricane Katrina made landfall. We are creating a truly national system of emergency management that will be able to draw on the nation's vast resources for a cohesive and complete local, state, and federal response." The following are highlights of the amendment: Recreates FEMA the U.S. Emergency Management Authority (USEMA) The USEMA will be an independent agency within the Department of Homeland Security and will have the same protections currently provided to the U.S. Coast Guard. For example, the DHS Secretary will have no authority to reorganize the structure of the agency, erode its assets or functions, or alter its mission without approval by Congress. Preparedness functions would be joined with response capabilities so that the organization that works with state and local officials to prepare for disasters is the same one that works with state and local officials to respond to disasters. USEMA would have a strengthened regional focus with federal "strike teams" for faster and more effective responses. These teams would ensure that the USEMA is familiar with regional threats and with state and local emergency personnel and can rapidly and effectively cooperate with first responders and public officials in disaster areas. The administrator of USEMA will report to the DHS Secretary, but will also have direct access to the President to advise on emergency management matters, much as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff does on military issues. Ensures that the administrator of USEMA has direct access to the President and serves as principal emergency-management advisor. Senators Collins and Lieberman will introduce subsequent legislation to implement other recommendations from their Hurricane Katrina report.