THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2009

FEMA BELONGS WITH DHS PRESIDENT, SECRETARY NAPOLITANO AGREE

WASHINGTON – Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Chairman Joe Lieberman, ID-Conn., and Ranking Member Susan Collins, R-Me., Thursday said the question about the Federal Emergency Management Agency's place within the Department of Homeland Security has long been settled, despite a House Committee's action.

In May, the Administration put to rest a long simmering dispute about whether FEMA should be an independent agency when DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano announced the Administration had no intention of cutting FEMA loose.

"FEMA is exactly where it belongs," Lieberman said, "at the center of the Department of Homeland Security where it plays a critical role in helping to protect Americans where they live and work from both natural and man-made disasters. Hurricane Katrina exposed a number of weaknesses within the agency, but those weaknesses are being addressed through the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, passed out of our Committee, through Congress, and signed by the President in 2006.

"Today, FEMA is busy building itself into a stronger, more accountable agency than it was in 2005, with a renewed sense of mission, greater stature, and more resources. Rather than splintering apart agencies that work together well, the President and Secretary Napolitano

wisely chose to allow FEMA to rebuild itself into a world class disaster preparedness and response agency."

Collins said she was disappointed by the House Committee's vote. "Removing FEMA from DHS makes no sense. It would ignore the input of first-responders and unravel all the impressive gains made in recent months since we passed our FEMA reform law. It would take us backward, not move us forward.

"We cannot argue with success," she added. "As we have seen from its responses to Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, the California wildfires, flooding in the Midwest, and winter storms in Maine, FEMA has made a great deal of progress since passage of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act that Senator Lieberman and I authored. The evidence that FEMA belongs in DHS is overwhelming and irrefutable. The current FEMA Administrator, Craig Fugate, told us that FEMA's placement in DHS was a settled question and urged us to keep focus on the real issue – improving FEMA and our nation's preparedness. At his confirmation hearing in April, Fugate said it best: 'I believe that the next confirmed administrator of FEMA needs to be focused on the next disaster. And being focused on that means that that debate, as far as I'm concerned, is over.'"

Following its poor response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, some DHS detractors began a campaign to remove FEMA from the Department and re-establish it as a stand-alone agency, as it had been before DHS was created in 2003. Although praised for its performance throughout much of the 1990's, when it was independent, FEMA never had the capacity to deal with a catastrophe the size of Hurricane Katrina and many forgot that it was faulted for its handling of Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

Since Hurricane Katrina, FEMA has demonstrated by its response to subsequent disasters that it is a stronger agency than it once was.

In addition to the Administration's firm support for keeping FEMA within DHS, eight first responder organizations endorsed that position as well. A DHS Inspector General report also concluded that FEMA should remain within the Department where it can access the resources and expertise of the entire Department, as have the Chairman and Ranking Member of the House Homeland Security Committee.

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