

TUESDAY, MAY 2, 2006

COMMITTEE RESPONDS TO SENATOR CLINTON'S REQUEST THAT FEMA BE RETURNED TO AN INDEPENDENT AGENCY

Senators Susan Collins, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, and Ranking Member Joseph Lieberman today sent a letter to Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton responding to her request that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) be returned to an independent status.

Senators Collins and Lieberman have released a bipartisan, 737 page, report titled; "Hurricane Katrina: A Nation Still Unprepared." The report, which was passed by the full Committee today, is the result of a seven-month investigation into the Hurricane Katrina disaster of 2005. At the heart of the report are 86 findings that focus on failures at all levels of government to plan, prepare and execute appropriate, timely, and effective mitigation and relief efforts for the Hurricane Katrina disaster; and recommendations that include replacing the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) with a new, more capable,

better funded National Preparedness and Response Authority staffed at the highest levels by people with emergency management or comparable experience.

The full text of the Senators' letter is as follows:

May 2, 2006

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
476 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Clinton:

We write in response to your letter of April 28, 2006, in which you express your opinion that FEMA should be made an independent agency and your opposition to the structural recommendations we have presented to the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. We appreciate you sharing your views on this important matter. For the following reasons, however, we have taken a different position on the future of emergency preparedness and response in this country.

Our Committee has recently completed a seven-month investigation of what happened in the days leading up to and during the response to Hurricane Katrina. We held 22 hearings at which 85 witnesses testified. Our staffs conducted more than 325 formal interviews and analyzed more than 838,000 pages of documents. We conducted transcribed interviews of 47 FEMA officials alone. In short, we took a close look at what went wrong in the Gulf States before and after the catastrophe struck.

One of our most important findings is that FEMA is not – and never has been – prepared for a catastrophe of Katrina's nature. As Scott Wells, a 6-year veteran of FEMA and the number two federal officer in Louisiana during the Katrina crisis put it, FEMA "is like bringing a donkey to the Kentucky Derby." It simply does not have the assets and resources needed to prepare for a massive hurricane like Katrina – not to mention a catastrophic terrorist attack – nor to carry out an effective response.

Our belief is that taking a weak FEMA out of the Department of Homeland Security would result in a still-weak, but independent, FEMA. The end result is an entity that still does not have the assets or resources to prepare for and respond to a catastrophe.

One belief we share is that FEMA should be elevated within the governmental structure and that the head of FEMA needs to have a good relationship with the President. But, again, we do not believe that elevating a weak FEMA is the answer.

Our answer is to strengthen FEMA, give it the stature, resources, and leadership it needs to be effective, and assign new responsibilities to the agency. We also would develop a robust regional structure so that the same officials assigned to assist state and local officials in responding to disasters work closely with them to prepare. To signal this new approach, we also propose a new name that better reflects the agency's new mission.

In your letter, you express the belief that we would “dismantle” FEMA and “reassign its duties within DHS.” The effect of what we are recommending, however, is exactly the opposite. The hardworking professionals of FEMA deserve a fresh start. We would take FEMA's existing personnel and assets and combine them with key preparedness and response resources – like grant programs and infrastructure protection functions – and call the combined entity the National Preparedness and Response Authority. The Director of the Authority would be elevated to the same level as the Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security. The Director would report to the Secretary of Homeland Security, but would also be the President's advisor on emergency management issues and would report directly to the President in times of catastrophe.

In other words, the professionals and assets of FEMA would become the core of a strong, new organization, and that organization would be given more clout within DHS and the government.

The NPRA would also maintain sibling relationships with key DHS assets, like the Coast Guard and law enforcement officers of Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement. These are precisely the entities that can help in the response to a catastrophe – conducting critical search and rescue missions and protecting lives and property. Moving FEMA out of DHS means needlessly severing these important organizational ties. It is far better to keep the ties and to accomplish the goals from within the Department of Homeland Security structure, which we do.