WEDNESDAY, MAY 24, 2006

LIEBERMAN SAYS FEMA RECOVERY IS FRAUGHT WITH PROBLEMS

WASHINGTON — Senator Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) delivered the following statement at the confirmation hearing for David Paulison, who has been nominated to become the official director of FEMA. Mr. Paulison currently serves as acting director.

Thank you Madam Chairman and welcome Chief Paulison to this hearing on your nomination to officially become the Under Secretary for Federal Emergency Management at the Department of Homeland Security, in effect, FEMA – an agency that we, ultimately, would like to see renamed and restructured. But, I'll come back to that later in my statement. Your background has clearly helped prepare you for the challenges you will face in this position.. You have more than 30 years experience as a firefighter in the Miami-Dade County Fire Department in Florida, and rose through the ranks to become Fire Chief, with oversight of the county's Office of Emergency Management. You led the U.S. Fire Administration, briefly served as Director of FEMA's Preparedness Division and have served as FEMA's Acting Director since September 2005. I think many of the problems we saw in FEMA's response to Hurricane Katrina were due to a management that did not have the same professional experience in emergency response, which is one of the reasons our Katrina report recommends that emergency management leaders have sufficient relevant experience. I also appreciate many of the actions you have taken as acting director of FEMA since Michael Brown's resignation – your hiring goals to bring the agency to full strength; plans to preposition relief supplies better; and to equip personnel better. Although these initiatives will help us be prepare better, we have far more work to do, especially as we head into a hurricane season that experts have ominously warned favors more catastrophic storms in both the Gulf and along the East Coast. We need FEMA leaning into the wind – not being blown apart by it. Having said that, as I mentioned earlier, Chairman Collins and I would like to

see FEMA replaced, with a new agency – the National Preparedness and Response Authority (NPRA) – established within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The FEMA label has become discredited and a symbol of ineffectiveness. It needs to change, and we believe those valuable FEMA employees – whose experience and expertise would energize the new NPRA when they are transferred – deserve to have the stigma lifted and their credibility restored by establishing a new structure that would bring out their best. In short, our proposal is about much more than a change in name. Right now, FEMA is too heavily concentrated in Washington and is disconnected from the real work of preparing for disasters at the state and local level. As Chairman Collins and I envision it, the new NPRA would have the leadership, structure, and authority to work with state and local officials to prepare for and respond to catastrophes. NPRA would have 10 strong regional offices, each with a permanent "strike team." These teams would include representatives from other federal agencies involved in emergency response to ensure that all relevant federal functions are familiar with regional threats, and have already coordinated with state and local emergency preparers and responders. I know there are those who believe FEMA should be a separate agency again and taken out of DHS. But our investigation found that FEMA never has been prepared for a catastrophe of Katrina's scope and intensity – even when it was an independent agency. As Scott Wells, the number-two federal officer in Louisiana during the Katrina crisis with 25 years of emergency management experience – told the Committee: "FEMA is not trained. FEMA is not equipped. FEMA is not organized to do very large response operations." If you move a weak FEMA out of DHS you're left with a weak FEMA, now isolated from the resources it needs and relies on from within DHS. What we need is more integration, not less. Under our proposal, NPRA would be responsible not just for disaster response, but for disaster preparedness as well, working hand in hand with state and local officials, other federal agencies, and the private and non-profit sectors to be ready for true catastrophes, whether natural or by the hand of terrorists. It would be able to take full advantage of the Department's significant resources – including the Coast Guard, communications capabilities and interoperability research, law enforcement, intelligence assets, infrastructure protection and billions of dollars in grants – for an all hazards approach to emergencies. I know you agree with the Chairman and me that emergency management must remain within DHS. However, we need much more than FEMA is now capable of delivering. I will want to know if you will work to shape this new agency to meet the needs of our nation in a disaster. I'd like to add a word about the Katrina recovery. Chief Paulison, you came before this Committee seven months ago to update us on FEMA's recovery effort and respond to our concerns that it was in disarray. Many of the questions we had then remain unanswered today, and we continue to

receive reports of inadequate planning, poor coordination, inflexible guidelines, and ineffective communications on FEMA's part. I understand that some of your recovery programs were not created for a catastrophe of Katrina's proportions, which is why Chairman Collins and I introduced legislation immediately after the storm to address some of the most pressing needs. One of the most essential proposals was to give the President the authority to waive the $26,200 individual assistance cap, which unfortunately was rejected. Nearly 14,000 people have now reached that cap and need additional assistance. FEMA clearly needs more tools to manage successfully long term recovery efforts, for communities as well as individuals. We hope to have your support as we develop more effective approaches. But some problems can't wait. For example, FEMA recently gave 30 days notice to many evacuees still living in apartments and trailers. Evacuees and local officials are expressing obvious frustration, and we cannot abandon these people now. I want to know how you will move this recovery forward in a fair and just manner. The new hurricane season is now just days away. But as we've seen with the flooding in New England, nature has its own timetable and disasters – while they can be anticipated – cannot be predicted. And terrorists can strike any time. For the time being, we need a FEMA that has learned from the mistakes of Katrina and is ready and able to jump in and save lives in the critical days and hours before and after a storm – and then ready to help communities rebuild in the weeks and months that follow. Thank you Madam Chairman.