

THURSDAY, JUNE 8, 2006

SENATE HOMELAND SECURITY COMMITTEE HOLDS HEARING ON WHERE FEMA BELONGS

Senate Homeland Security Committee Chairman Susan Collins (R-ME) and Ranking Member Joe Lieberman (D-CT) held a public hearing today entitled “National Emergency Management: Where Does FEMA Belong?”

Witnesses at the hearing, including Secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff and Admiral Thad Allen, Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, voiced strong support for keeping the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). One of the key findings of the Committee’s Hurricane Katrina report, “A Nation Still Unprepared,” which was released in April, was that FEMA should be strengthened and reformed but kept within the Department of Homeland Security.

Other witnesses included Dr. Donald Kettl, Director of the Fels Institute of Government and the University of Pennsylvania, and Dr. John Harrald, Director of the Institute for Crisis, Disaster, and Risk Management at the George Washington University.

Senator Collins said, “Of the recommendations in the Committee’s report on Katrina, the one we discuss today is the cornerstone.

“Like FEMA, the strong new agency we envision would be part of the Department of Homeland Security. This will enable the Authority to maintain close relationships with other crucial DHS assets, such as the Coast Guard and the law enforcement agencies within the Department. 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. Maintaining this connection is of paramount importance if we are to build a true all-hazards, comprehensive preparation and response structure”

“Our driving motivation for rebuilding and reinventing FEMA is to save lives and to help those who survive disasters rebuild their lives,” Senator Lieberman said. “Over 1,500 people lost their lives as a result of Hurricane Katrina – a devastating number when we consider that no other storm in the last 30 years has caused as many as 100 deaths. Tens of thousands were left without basic necessities for days in conditions that shocked all Americans. The fact is that today, months after the storm and at the start of yet another hurricane season, hundreds of thousands displaced by Katrina and Rita still face uncertain futures. We can and must do better together.”

In his remarks before Committee members, Secretary Chertoff said, “I would like to make my views on this matter clear and unambiguous from the outset: removing FEMA from DHS would greatly undermine the federal government’s ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters, both natural and man-made.”

Admiral Thad Allen echoed these sentiments during his testimony, citing his personal experiences during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita as having led him to this view. “Hurricanes Katrina and Rita drastically demonstrated the need for a robust, comprehensive and nationally integrated response capability; it is imperative that we continue to address this need....We must capitalize on the synergies created by having FEMA within DHS, and continue to develop a united front against all hazards, all threats, at all times.”

Senators Collins and Lieberman are currently working on legislation incorporating the Committee’s findings and recommendations to ensure that our nation is better prepared to respond to disasters. Of the 88 recommendations in the Committee’s report on Katrina, establishing a new National Preparedness and Response Authority within DHS that would be responsible for both disaster response and preparedness is the cornerstone.