

TUESDAY, JULY 11, 2006

# LIEBERMAN OFFERS BIPARTISAN PLAN FOR NATIONAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Ranking Member Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., Tuesday co-sponsored a bipartisan amendment to the Senate Homeland Security Appropriations bill that would reinvent FEMA into an agency capable of responding to all disasters rapidly and with state and local coordination.

The Committee's study of the disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina led to the proposal, also sponsored by Committee Chairman Susan Collins, R-Me., Senator Tom Carper, D-Del., and Senator Trent Lott, R-Miss.

Following is text of the Senator's floor statement:

Mr. President, I am pleased to join with Chairman Collins and Senators Carper and Lott today to introduce this amendment to make FEMA into an agency capable of responding swiftly and effectively to the most serious kinds of disaster – whether it is a hurricane the size and scope of Katrina, a natural disaster the likes of which we see more routinely in this country from year to year, or a terrorist attack, which our enemies hope will be even more devastating than the attacks of 9/11 and for which we must be perpetually on the defensive and prepared.

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 Katrina made landfall. And it would strengthen emergency preparedness and response within the Homeland Security Department, which this Congress created a short time ago to prevent, prepare for, and ultimately respond to disasters of all kinds. This amendment would create 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.

Mr. President, the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee spent seven months at the request of the leadership of the Senate in 2005 and 2006 investigating the botched government response to that catastrophic hurricane.

We found that, at all levels, our government was ill-equipped to deal with the massive human suffering all along the Gulf Coast that followed the storm's landfall, suffering that shocked and angered the American people who expect better support from their government for fellow Americans in need. These failings were caused by negligence, lack of resources, lack of capability, but most of all, a lack of leadership – from the very top to the very bottom.

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. The Committee's report had merit because we told the story of what happened and what didn't happen, of the clear warnings of a storm like Katrina, and the clear predictions that we were not ready for it. The committee went beyond just telling the story and offered a number of recommendations about what was needed to improve our preparations, response, and recovery. Chairman Collins and I will introduce broader legislation to encompass all of our report's key recommendations shortly. But we begin today with the foundation: rejoining the functions of disaster response with disaster preparedness.

We are calling this reinvented organization the United States Emergency Management Authority (USEMA) and it would be at the very core of the Department of Homeland Security, just as FEMA was originally intended to be when the proposed new department took shape in 2002, based on the recommendations of the Hart-Rudman Commission the previous year. How could one have a Department of Homeland Security aimed at preparing for and responding to terrorist attacks without the primary agency responsible for emergency management at its core?

We are not just renaming FEMA. Where FEMA has often struggled to cope with normal hurricanes, the mission of the new Authority will be to partner with state and local governments, other federal agencies, the private sector and non-governmental organizations to build a national system of emergency management that can respond effectively to a truly catastrophic incident, or other natural or man-made disaster

Our investigation of what went wrong during Hurricane Katrina made it clear that part of the problem was caused by separate and uncoordinated federal preparedness and response functions within the Department of Homeland Security.

In the years before Katrina, FEMA, the agency charged with coordinating our nation's response to terrorist attacks and natural disasters, too often was out of the loop when critical decisions about how to prepare were made. It had no say in how to spend billions of dollars in preparedness grants. Exercises were designed and held without serious input by FEMA. Relationships with state and local officials on the front lines were not developed. And so, FEMA's ability to respond was crippled because it was not working hand in glove with those making preparations – whether at the state and local level, other federal agencies, or the private and non-profit sectors.

Our amendment, first and foremost, will ensure that our preparedness efforts are inseparable from the capabilities needed to respond. USEMA will provide the resources, and it will have the ability, and the obligation, to plan and train with state and local emergency management officials, just as it will have the responsibility to coordinate with them at the time of a disaster.

Where FEMA has been slow to respond, and too often reactive, the new Authority will be charged with developing a federal response capability that can act rapidly and proactively when necessary to deliver assistance essential to saving lives in a disaster. Where FEMA has not been fully integrated with DHS in the past, the new Authority will be charged with coordinating with key agencies in DHS, like the Coast Guard, under the leadership of the Secretary of Homeland Security.

Our amendment would also give the new authority special status within the Department of Homeland Security – the same status the Coast Guard and Secret Service now have. With this status, changes to the agency's functions and its assets could only be made by Congressional statute. We would also insist in this legislation that the Administrator and other key agency officials have the necessary experience and qualifications for the job. It's unbelievable, in many ways, that that has not been the statutory requirement. To have people

who don't have emergency management experience is really irresponsible. In other words, USEMA would not be plagued by unqualified appointees as FEMA has been in the past.

The Chairman and I also envision a new agency with robust regional offices to focus on preparedness and response coordination with local and state agencies. Let's take the focus away from Washington and place it where it belongs, where the real work of preparedness is done: on the front lines, in the states, and in the municipalities. This will guarantee that federal officials are familiar with regional and local threats. Different parts of the country are vulnerable to different threats. This regional approach will ensure that officials are not exchanging business cards on the day the disaster strikes, and that they are not meeting on the day of the disaster, that, in fact, they know each other.

I know some of my colleagues believe FEMA should be removed from DHS and given independent status. But Senator Collins and I know from our investigation that this is not the solution. Even when it was independent, FEMA had never developed the capacity to respond to a catastrophe like Hurricane Katrina. So returning it to independent status as if those were the golden days of yore are not based on fact and will in no way solve the problems we face. In fact, it will make solutions, and I would say preparations and response, to disasters far more difficult. Removing the agency from the Department will only create additional problems, duplications, and disconnectedness. FEMA – or our reinvented version of it – should be the critical core of the Department.

To cope with a catastrophe, the government's chief preparations and response agency must have access to the vast resources of the Department of Homeland Security and it needs to work seamlessly with other agencies that have critical roles to play during catastrophes. Each agency and function will have to work with the others, and smooth working relationships under intense pressure are more likely if officials know one another, if agencies have a history with each other, and if everyone ultimately serves the same Secretary of Homeland Security.

The grievous conditions of Gulf Coast communities in the week after Katrina's landfall embarrassed us before the world and quite appropriately angered us because we know we can do better. But the Gulf Coast and the force of Katrina are not isolated communities. Other American communities are similarly vulnerable today – whether to a natural disaster or terrorist attack. We also know that significant flaws in the nation's readiness remain. Another response like the one we saw during Katrina, allowing such a response to occur, is simply not an option.

Our proposal is not about rearranging bureaucratic boxes. We have studied past failings and carefully considered how to improve our performance the next time. We have been driven by that singular goal. We have not had any thoughts of protecting the status quo or protecting one entity over another. We have tried to come up with a solution that will best protect American people the next time disaster strikes. We have been driven by the imperative to save people's lives because that is what is on the line, and what we have lost. The changes embodied in this amendment promise a better response the next time disaster strikes.

I ask my colleagues for their support on this amendment so that we will not be embarrassed before the world again. And I thank Senator Lott and Senator Carper for joining in a truly bipartisan national interest to protect the homeland security. Thank you.