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# IS FEMA PREPARED TO RESPOND TO A MAJOR CATASTROPHE?

WASHINGTON – Against the backdrop of the catastrophe unfolding in Japan, Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Chairman Joe Lieberman, ID-Conn., and Ranking Member Susan Collins, R-Me., Thursday heard testimony about the ability of the federal government to respond if a disaster of equivalent magnitude struck the United States.

The hearing–titled “Catastrophic Preparedness: How Ready is FEMA to Respond to the Next Big Disaster?”–was called to examine FEMA’s progress in rebuilding itself after its poor response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and since reform legislation was signed into law in 2006. That legislation, written by Lieberman and Collins, was informed by an exhaustive investigation the Committee conducted into the failure of all levels of government to respond adequately to Katrina.

“After our investigation, the Committee drafted and Congress passed the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act in 2006,” Lieberman said. “Our aim was to rebuild FEMA into a stronger, more capable agency. Five years after Hurricane Katrina, we are better prepared for a catastrophe than we have ever been. But the epic disaster in Japan reminds us that FEMA must continue to improve.”

Lieberman also noted that while the hearing was focused on FEMA, “Response to and recovery from disaster is the responsibility of a lot of people. Other federal agencies, state and local governments, the private sector, and every American have roles to play, and many of them also need to improve their capabilities.”

Collins said: “More than four years ago, Congress enacted the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, which the Chairman and I authored. The legislation was designed to take the hard-learned lessons of Hurricane Katrina and bring about improvements in the nation’s overall emergency preparedness and response systems.

“Our law has indeed improved FEMA’s disaster response capabilities. From major floods to wildfires, we have witnessed improvements throughout the country. In Maine, I saw this progress in FEMA’s responses to the Patriot’s Day storm of 2007, the spring 2008 floods in Aroostook County, and other disasters since then. FEMA has become a more effective, better led agency during the past four years. Nevertheless, questions remain about our ability to handle a mega-disaster.”

Former Department of Homeland Security Inspector General Richard Skinner in September issued the most recent evaluation of FEMA’s transformation. His report concluded that FEMA has made moderate progress in most areas where reform was needed, for example, with respect to coordinating medical special needs evacuations, deploying emergency communications equipment, tracking inventory, and creating a national supply chain strategy.

But the former IG’s testimony and report also noted that other longer-term planning and preparedness efforts have stalled, have been put on hold while the Administration reviews them, or are undergoing significant revision; FEMA’s financial management and IT systems are still inadequate, and the agency still has no way to determine how well its preparedness grants are working.

In addition to Skinner, witnesses at the hearing were FEMA Administrator W. Craig Fugate and William O. Jenkins, Jr., Director, Homeland Security and Justice Issues at the Government Accountability Office.

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