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Hurricane Katrina

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Actions of the Fish and Wildlife Service as They Relate to Hurricane Katrina and the Ongoing Recovery

**TESTIMONY OF H. DALE HALL,
DIRECTOR, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT**

AND PUBLIC WORKS, REGARDING RESPONSE TO, AND IMPACTS OF, HURRICANE KATRINA

November 2, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, my name is H. Dale Hall, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the devastating impact Hurricane Katrina had on the Southeast region and the tremendous difference Service employees continue to make in those communities that lost so much.

We have gained a great deal of experience in responding to these types of situations over the years. In 2004, the Service's Southeast Region was impacted by four major hurricanes – Ivan, Charley, Jeanne and Frances. This year, Hurricane Katrina, which devastated dozens of communities across three states and wreaked havoc in the lives of thousands of citizens, was followed by Hurricanes Rita, Ophelia and Wilma. This testimony will focus on the Service's response to Hurricane Katrina and the impact Katrina had on Service resources. Throughout my statement I will be referencing some accompanying slides.

Initial Response

In the days immediately preceding Hurricane Katrina's landfall, Service offices and refuges in Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama implemented their Hurricane Emergency Action Plans. These plans outline steps to secure Service facilities and ensure the safety of employees.

On August 30, the day following Hurricane Katrina's landfall, the Service Special Operations Response Team (SORT) arrived in the incident area to begin rescue efforts and assess initial damages. The SORT Team is made up of Service Refuge Law Enforcement Officers. Immediately following the SORT Team, the Incident Command Team (ICT) began arriving on scene. This team is made up of Service personnel from various programs trained in emergency response and recovery efforts. Service personnel quickly focused on assisting the people and communities in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. They immediately engaged in search and rescue activities, saving lives from the outset. (see slides 2-6)

Within four days of Hurricane Katrina's landfall, the Service had established a full service Incident Command Post at Big Branch National Wildlife Refuge in Lacombe, Louisiana, 20 miles north of New Orleans. Working cooperatively with other agencies, including the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, we participated in rescuing more than 4,500 people, including two occupants from a helicopter crash on a rooftop. The heroic efforts of Service employees make me proud to be a part of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Charles Flynn, the Fire Chief of St. Tammany Parish Fire District 3, said:

"The support that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provided to Lacombe has been outstanding. I want to thank all of you for the great help from feeding us to clearing our roads. It has been a blessing to have you here."

As the need for emergency rescue operations decreased, the Service began assisting agencies with recovery operations. On September 5, we began working with the U.S. Coast Guard on spill response operations in Alabama and Mississippi. We began assisting with spill response operations in Louisiana on September 12. A week later, Service personnel began efforts to minimize water quality impacts from the de-watering of New Orleans and, on September 28, the Service deployed 24 Refuge Law Enforcement Officers to Lafayette, Louisiana, to assist the Red Cross.

In addition, the Service's Southeast Region sent out clarifying guidance to remind Federal and state agencies that the Endangered Species Act allows a waiver of the regulatory requirements required by the law in the case of Presidentially declared disasters. This guidance ensured that the Endangered Species Act would not stand in the way of recovery and clean-up efforts.

Community Service Activities

More than 150 Service employees live and work in the areas affected by the hurricane. Thankfully, all of our employees are safe and accounted for, but 21 of our employees lost their homes and personal belongings. In spite of this, some of these employees were quick to volunteer to help others less fortunate. More than 600 Service employees worked shifts at the full-service base of operations established at Big Branch National Wildlife Refuge. This facility provided food, water, shelter, fuel, showers and laundry facilities to our displaced employees and their families, as well as local police and fire departments, 100 American Red Cross and International Red Cross volunteers, National Guard servicemen, Immigration and Customs personnel, 40 Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) personnel, and other law enforcement officers engaged in the search and rescue efforts throughout the affected area. The operations base at Big Branch provided more than 25,000 meals (including 200 each day that were sent to support staff and patients at the Louisiana Heart Hospital), more than 3,600 showers, and more than 1,900 loads of laundry. Dr. James E. Smith, an Interventional Cardiologist with the Louisiana Heart Hospital, said:

“Our location was difficult to re-supply after Katrina passed. It became important to have a little down time, get out of the facility and go get a meal in 15 or 20 minutes and be back on the job. Also, many of the patients and their families were able to get the sack lunches from the Fish and Wildlife facility. It was just a wonderful service and we really, really needed that support.”

Service crews cleared more than 300 driveways, over fourteen miles of roads, ten miles of fire breaks, and four major parking lots, including the Louisiana Heart Hospital, Lake Castle School and the local Post Office. Our employees conducted reconnaissance on 65 miles of roadways on more than 100 streets. Service personnel assisted numerous citizens, including clearing a driveway so that an ambulance could transport a patient home from the hospital. (see slides 7-13)

Agents from the Service’s Office of Law Enforcement, as well as Refuge Law Enforcement Officers from various areas of the country, assisted in numerous search and recovery missions. During a live interview, CNN Commentator Donna Brazile made a plea for help in finding her sister, Sheila, who lived in an assisted living facility in New Orleans and had not been heard from since the storm. We sent a boat to the last place where Sheila had been seen - a flooded area of New Orleans that had not yet been visited by rescuers. They found Sheila and five other people in the building with no food or water. Donna Brazile said without the efforts of the Service, her sister probably would have died. This is one of many stories of Service employees going beyond the call of duty to rescue people in need during this crucial time after the hurricane hit.

Impacts to Wildlife and Service Facilities

The area impacted by Hurricane Katrina has one of the largest concentrations of national wildlife refuges in the country due to the important coastal wetlands in the region. Nineteen national wildlife refuges were affected by Hurricane Katrina. Sixteen of these are coastal refuges that were temporarily closed in the aftermath of Katrina. Our refuges and other facilities have addressed the most urgent clean-up and repairs and are refining damage assessments to incorporate all available information from the impacted area, including reports from initial responders, emergency personnel, station managers and field personnel. We also rely on initial aerial reconnaissance and meteorological and hydrological data. These reports provide specific information about damages and the magnitude of impacts to both fish and wildlife resources and agency operations. Cost estimates are developed based upon actual costs to construct or repair damaged assets or the cost of completing similar work in the past. Over the past two years, our initial assessments of clean-up and facility repairs have been 95 percent accurate when compared with actual costs.

Southeastern Louisiana, and especially Breton National Wildlife Refuge, is globally important for colonial nesting birds. Up to 15 percent of the world's Brown Pelicans and up to 30 percent of the world's Sandwich Terns nest in this area. Breton, which is part of the Chandeleur Islands and celebrated its centennial last year, lost 50 to 70 percent of its land mass due the effects of Hurricane Katrina. In addition, Mississippi Sandhill Crane, Big Branch Marsh, Delta, Bogue Chitto, and Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuges suffered significant impacts. We estimate the National Wildlife Refuge System in the Southeast Region experienced direct land losses, accelerated degradation or other damage on more than 150,000 acres of coastal and bottomland wetlands.

Though it is still early and more analysis is needed, the Service and its partners have completed some preliminary assessments and expect additional coastal wetland impacts. Coastal marshes in the Mississippi River delta and the Parishes south of New Orleans, and the marshes of Southwest Louisiana, were hard hit by winds, surge, and saltwater from Hurricane Katrina. Two important wetland plants were severely impacted; *Spartina* was extensively uprooted, and *Phragmites* was laid over and burned by saline storm surge. Further spatial analyses will be needed to quantify the acreage of those wetlands that were converted to open water. Coastal forested wetlands ranging from eastern Lake Pontchartrain Basin to the Pearl River were defoliated and sustained heavy damage to standing trees.

Although we are working with other agencies to ensure that the requirements of the Endangered Species Act do not impede recovery, we are focused on the assessment of hurricane impacts to wildlife species, and particularly endangered species. We have received reports of substantial mussel and fish die-offs. Aquatic ecosystems and fish communities may have been severely impacted by contaminant releases, sedimentation, loss of spawning habitat,

and disruption of migration. About 50 sea turtle nests along the Alabama coast were lost, including all 10 nests at Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge. In many areas, extensive timber damage has removed potential nesting trees for bald eagles and other birds. Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge in Mississippi and Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana lost a significant number of trees, including cavity trees used by roosting and nesting red-cockaded woodpeckers. Tree loss also will impact foraging habitat for these endangered birds. Primary dunes, which are habitat for the Alabama beach mouse, have been destroyed. In addition, 90 percent of the secondary dunes were destroyed and scrub habitat was damaged by salt spray from the ocean. Both habitat types serve as food sources for the beach mouse and it is likely their population will be substantially reduced from the effects of both Hurricane Katrina and last year's Hurricane Ivan. (see slides 14-16)

The Service is currently working to assess Hurricane Katrina's full impact on the area's natural resources, some of which may take some time to become apparent. Such impacts include the spread of exotic species facilitated by the storm, ecosystem changes, and the effects of contaminant releases. We will be working with other agencies, states, and our partners to identify the appropriate division of responsibilities for restoration and recovery and utilizing our combined capabilities to address these needs.

Future Actions

In addition to providing essential habitat for fish, wildlife, and waterfowl, coastal wetlands also serve as important buffers, or shock absorbers, during large storm events. Without them, inland areas are more prone to effects of storm surge, flooding, high winds, and erosion. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, roughly 24 square miles of valuable coastal wetlands were being lost annually. To address the problem, in 1990 Congress passed the Coastal Wetland Planning, Protection and Restoration Act to provide much-needed funding to stem wetland loss throughout the country but focused specifically on coastal Louisiana. The Service represents the Secretary of the Interior on the CWPRRA Task Force, which has approved 154 small scale restoration projects to protect and restore more than 117,000 net acres of coastal wetlands over the past fourteen years. In addition, the Service works closely with the State of Louisiana and other agencies in developing comprehensive restoration plans.

Through a number of programs, the Service will be assisting other Federal agencies, the State, and local entities in wetlands conservation and restoration. Programs such as the Coastal Wetlands Conservation grants will allow the Service to have a significant role in reversing Louisiana's coastal wetland losses and helping to implement a systematic approach consisting of larger projects working in concert with smaller projects to restore essential geomorphic structures and processes. To abbreviate the number and duration of independent feasibility

studies, State and Federal participants formed the Louisiana Coastal Area (LCA) Comprehensive Coastwide Ecosystem Restoration Study Team. The LCA Study was completed in November 2004 and identifies the most critical ecological needs of the Louisiana coastal area in locations where delaying action would result in a loss of opportunity to achieve restoration.

The Service is working through its ecological services programs to assist Federal agencies in developing plans for building in wetland areas in a way that considers the need to restore ecological functions that will help prevent future flooding and help minimize the impact of future storms. We are also taking this opportunity to work with stakeholders to minimize the potential for oil spill and oil leakages that can degrade coastal wetlands and rob them of the ability to act as natural buffers.

The Service has already begun working with all affected partners to assess conservation restoration needs throughout the region impacted by Hurricane Katrina. The goal will be restoring coastal wetland habitats to continue to provide wildlife habitat, coastal protection, and economic benefits. We look forward to working with the Committee, our Federal and state partners, and local communities to meet this challenge.

Finally, I would like to thank the Service employees who, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, went above and beyond the call of duty to quickly respond to citizens in their time of need. Their quick, decisive actions served to highlight the ability of the Service to provide vital equipment, supplies, and personnel familiar with their communities to save lives and property in the most extraordinary of circumstances.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for the opportunity to be here. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the other Members of the Committee might have.

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