

**STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE JAMES L. OBERSTAR
MARCH 20, 2007
POST KATRINA TEMPORARY HOUSING: DILEMMAS AND SOLUTIONS**

Today is our Committee's first hearing on FEMA related issues in the 110th Congress. While this is our first hearing, our Committee has already pursued a vigorous agenda on FEMA related issues including working with the leadership on critical legislation to address the continuing needs in the Gulf Coast Region after Hurricane Katrina.

The jurisdiction of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee over FEMA is well known and well established. This Committee reported HR 1144, introduced by Rep. Clyburn and amended by Congresswoman Norton, which provides the most significant legislative relief for communities devastated by Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma in nearly 18 months by addressing serious needs that were left unaddressed by both the President and the 109th Congress.

The Transportation and Infrastructure Committee has also been working with other Committees, including the Appropriations Committee on legislation that addresses many housing and other needs still outstanding more than 18 months after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast. I am pleased that the House recognizes the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee's expertise and is seeking our assistance in addressing these problems both large and small.

In the 109th Congress, the Committee was actively involved in Emergency Management and Homeland Security issues, and held off hearings on issues within the Committee's jurisdiction. Additionally, the Committee was actively involved with a number of pieces of legislation relating to Homeland Security and the management of Federal

disasters and emergencies. Committee Members were appointed as conferees on the Security and Accountability for Every Port Act of 2006.

Several bills were passed as part of the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act of 2007 Public Law 109-295 including:

- H.R. 2338, the Rural Disaster Assistance Fairness Act
- H.R. 3208, the Disaster Relief Equity Act
- H.R. 4381, To Amend Title 5 of the United States Code, to Permit Access to Databases Maintained by the Federal Emergency Management Agency for Purposes of Complying with Sex Offender Registry and Notification Laws, and for Other Purposes
- H.R. 4517, To Amend the Robert T Stafford Disaster relief and Emergency Assistance Act to Restore Federal Aid for the Repair, Restoration, and Replacement of Private Nonprofit Educational Facilities that are Damaged or destroyed by a Major Disaster
- H.R. 5013, Disaster Recovery Personal Protection Act of 2006
- S. 3721 Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006

This last bill contained many of the provisions of HR 5316, Restoring Emergency Services to Protect Our Nation from Disasters Act of 2006, or the RESPOND Act of 2006, which was endorsed by our Committee. The changes made to FEMA will take effect at the end of this month. I anticipate that this Committee will want to conduct rigorous oversight of those changes, including investigating whether these changes were sufficient or further legislative action is necessary to provide FEMA additional flexibility and independence.

In addition to these legislative activities, the Subcommittee held hearings on a variety of topics. A hearing entitled “The National Preparedness System: What are We Preparing For?” examined the progress of developing a comprehensive National Preparedness System, and assessed whether DHS focused on terrorism at the expenses of natural disaster preparedness. After the catastrophic Hurricanes in the Gulf Coast, the Subcommittee held a series of comprehensive hearings on various issues involving the Hurricanes in the Gulf Region including, “Recovering after Katrina: Ensuring that Federal Emergency Management

Agency is up to the Task;” a joint hearing with the Subcommittee on Water Resources and the Environment on “A Vision and Strategy for Rebuilding New Orleans;” “Legislative Proposals in Response to Hurricane Katrina;” and “Disasters and the Department of Homeland Security: Where Do We Go From Here?”

The Subcommittee held some field hearings in Whittier, California, on “The Big One: How Do We Ensure a Robust Federal Response to a Catastrophic Earthquake in the Los Angeles Region?” as well as a field hearing in St. Louis, Missouri, on “How Do We Ensure a Robust Federal Response to a Catastrophic Earthquake in the New Madrid Region?” Finally, the Subcommittee held a hearing on “Proposed Amendments to and the Reauthorization of the National Dam Safety Program Act.”

It is evident that this Subcommittee has vested interests in disaster mitigation, disaster response, and disaster recovery.

The previous activity our Committee has undertaken in this Congress has mostly focused on providing assistance to the devastated communities in the Gulf and their citizens. Today we turn our focus specifically to housing needs that citizens in the Gulf Coast still face over 18 months after Hurricane Katrina, as well as the Housing needs of citizens of communities who have been struck by natural disasters since Katrina

Today, we are examining FEMA’s housing programs under the Stafford Act in the context of Hurricane Katrina and the 2004 Hurricane season in which Florida, the State of our Ranking Member, was struck an unprecedented four times. We want to compare how housing has been addressed after these disasters as compared to other disasters.

In both of these instances there appears to be a large housing need long after the 18 months anticipated by the Stafford Act. Among the issues we hope to examine, is whether these housing needs are becoming the “new normal” or these disasters are outliers. Is the

root cause of cause of this housing need economic? Is this a problem related to the underlying statutory authority or how it is implemented? Is this the failure of other agencies and organizations? Has FEMA become a long term safety net?

I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses and as appropriate, working with them to help ensure that our Nation's citizens get the housing they need after their communities are devastated by disasters.