

The Statement of
The Honorable Eleanor Holmes Norton
Hearing on
“FEMA’s Preparedness and Response to All Hazards”
April 26, 2007

Today’s hearing will address the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2007, which has just become effective. The Subcommittee called this early hearing, when the slate is clean and FEMA has the opportunity to start anew, to allow the agency to indicate its way forward under the Post-Katrina Act and to permit first responder experts to explain their understanding. The Post-Katrina Act specifically clarifies the “all-hazards” strategy by mandating preparedness strategies that acknowledge the necessity of building common response capabilities to meet specific disasters, whatever their origin. The Subcommittee is eager to assist FEMA in carrying out the Post-Katrina Act for an integrated FEMA, where preparedness, response, and recovery present a seamless continuum, and natural and other non-terrorist events take the appropriately prominent place within FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security.

There is no need to rehash the details of how the Department responded to four major Florida hurricanes during the 2004 season, which were precursors of the larger problems that emerged from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. The agency’s reaction to Katrina exposed the weakness of segregating preparedness from the necessary functions of response and recovery. Congress responded with the Post-Katrina Act that requires more autonomy for FEMA. The point of the hearing today is to give FEMA and the expert witnesses the opportunity to seize the initiative in describing how they believe the new mandate to prepare for “all hazards” should operate and any differences they may perceive between operations in the past and what they expect under the Post-Katrina Act.

Hurricane Katrina taught us that, notwithstanding the unique 9/11 tragedy and preparedness in an era of global terrorism, our citizens face other serious risks every day, almost none of them terror related. The emergency responders who receive FEMA grants are expected to use these funds even for the unexpected, whether from the effects of power outages, like the total New York City blackout of 1977, the blackout of 2003 that traveled throughout the Midwest to the Northeast, hazmat rail accidents in South Carolina and elsewhere, or “Tractor Man,” who dangerously tied up downtown Washington in 2003. Of course, responders must also prepare for serious seasonal acts of nature as well as highly unusual natural events, most recently, for example, a tornado in hurricane -prone Florida. At the same time, FEMA and emergency responders must plan for natural disasters we hope never come, such as Governor Schwarzenegger’s warnings about the California levees deteriorating or earthquakes along the San Andreas Fault.

The endless list of possible events suggests the seriously unpredictable nature of what is expected of the agency. How will the new FEMA and our responders reconcile planning for an act of nature in hazard prone parts of the country such as California, Florida, and the Great Plains with preparing for random acts of terror that could come in targeted or untargeted cities? When FEMA was created as an independent agency, it seemed no more likely that a section

of the District of Columbia would be declared a disaster area, as occurred because of flooding following hurricane Isabel, than that the Pentagon would be attacked. Yet, even today a natural disaster is a more likely event here, even though the nation's capital is in the first tier for a terrorist attack and the last for flooding.

Because the Post-Katrina Act is new, the Subcommittee, of course, can have no criticism concerning its implementation, but today the subcommittee seeks the agency's vision and plans for assuring Congress that the lessons of Katrina have been absorbed and "all hazards" will receive the requisite attention. The agency director is responsible for developing FEMA's approach for carrying out the Act's new mandate. Ironically, however, the director chose to go to a meeting with others from the Department of Homeland Security at the Israeli Embassy. Only after I called the agency director, was the subcommittee assured of testimony from Vice Admiral Harvey Johnson, the agency's deputy administrator, leaving the unfortunate impression that the Post-Katrina emphasis can always be trumped. I hope that testimony from the agency today shows otherwise, especially considering that we have sought to do oversight over the new act by allowing the head of the agency to lay out his vision and views in the first instance, rather than only rely on after-the-fact oversight criticism.

We are pleased to welcome Vice Admiral Johnson and thank him for agreeing to testify. We especially welcome our expert witnesses from the emergency response sectors that must work with FEMA to assure success.

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