

*Testimony Of*

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*“The Role of Intercity Passenger Rail During Times of  
National Emergency”*

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Good Morning Chairwoman Brown and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today. My name is Glenn Cannon, and I am the Assistant Administrator for the Disaster Operations Directorate at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), a proud part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

It is my pleasure to discuss with you today future planning for rail transportation to support evacuations during disasters and the challenges of using rail for such evacuations.

FEMA has developed in-depth experience in disaster response. In order to realize Administrator Paulison's vision for a new FEMA and improve our Nation's all-hazards preparedness, protection, response, recovery and mitigation systems and capabilities, we are taking the first steps in a multi-year effort that will significantly increase FEMA's core operational capabilities. The cornerstone of this effort is adopting a more leaning forward and collaborative approach to disaster response, as well as strengthening our capabilities across the full spectrum of operational and support missions. Our ultimate goal is to transform FEMA into the Nation's preeminent emergency management and preparedness organization.

FEMA learned a number of important lessons following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Many of these lessons were identified in after action reviews conducted by Congress, the White House, and non-governmental organizations. The lesson learned that has the most bearing on today's conversation is the need to strengthen regional evacuation planning and coordination structures and capabilities to facilitate future responses.

In addition, the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (PKEMRA) articulated new expectations for FEMA, established new leadership responsibilities, expanded our scope of missions, and called for FEMA to undertake a broad range of activities. Providing critical planning and resource support to help our State and local government partners in the Gulf Coast region prepare for disasters has been one of our highest priorities for the past two years. One of the activities that we have been most intensely engaged in has been in the area of evacuation planning.

## **BACKGROUND**

Within the Federal government, FEMA has the primary responsibility for leading and coordinating preparedness and response efforts. The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act), authorizes FEMA to provide assistance to States and disaster victims in presidentially declared major disasters and emergencies. FEMA's Disaster Operations, Disaster Assistance, and Logistics Management Directorates also provide precautionary evacuation and return assistance to at risk populations in accordance with the Stafford Act. However, in this effort, FEMA does not, nor can we, act alone.

## **RAIL EVACUATION PLANNING EFFORTS IN NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA**

Since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, FEMA has provided substantial assistance to Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama to support the development of a Gulf Coast Evacuation Plan that also

extends to adjacent States that may host Gulf Coast evacuees, so-called “impact” states. This effort is designed to coordinate several States’ evacuation plans to create a more cohesive and unified effort. To achieve this goal, multi-agency teams engaged with each State to identify requirements and capabilities and developed a plan that integrates shelter planning with transportation planning. The result of these efforts will be a more timely, better organized, and better coordinated evacuation by those with their own transportation, as well as for those who need assistance in evacuating by bus or air. A Gulf Coast Mass Evacuation Capabilities Enhancement Meeting was convened in spring 2007 to validate the Gulf Coast Evacuation Plan and to further identify gaps for the evacuation of special needs patients.

FEMA has also established a Warm Cell Joint Field Office in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to conduct specific planning for a mass evacuation of the 12 coastal Parishes of Louisiana. The Warm Cell’s Transportation Management Unit and Medical Management Unit worked with other Federal and State agencies to identify assets for transportation requirements, validate transportation and medical evacuation plans, identify gaps and shortfalls within the State, and provide solutions. This planning effort, closely coordinated with Louisiana State and local planning representatives, helped ensure that a comprehensive evacuation plan including transportation, sheltering, mass care, and repopulation, is ready to support Louisiana. The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) also supported the Warm Cell activities by providing ground and rail transportation subject matter experts and planners

In addition to these broader scope regional planning efforts, FEMA has supported multi-modal evacuation planning specifically for Louisiana and the City of New Orleans. A major component of this evacuation planning leverages the capabilities of the National Passenger Railroad Corporation (Amtrak) and intercity rail transport to evacuate the New Orleans metropolitan area. In July 2007, FEMA entered into a contract with Amtrak to provide emergency railroad transportation services for evacuating persons from New Orleans to other locations in the Gulf Coast Region, in the event of a declared emergency during the 2007 Hurricane Season.

The contract required Amtrak to provide support for the evacuation of New Orleans in the event a mandatory evacuation of the city became necessary. This contract covered two basic components: Preparedness Planning and Mobilization and Event Mobilization/Demobilization. The Preparedness Planning and Mobilization component provided an Operating Plan which provided for 24 rail cars with stored equipment, food provisions, an equipment mobilization plan, refrigerator rail cars, staff mobilization plans, insurance, and standby costs. The Event Mobilization/Demobilization component included the Amtrak “Go Team” Management and other staffing, equipment mobilization, daily continued state of readiness, equipment, route related labor, non-route related labor, turn around servicing, mobile command center, evacuation operations for New Orleans, and return of evacuees to New Orleans.

As part of the Preparedness Planning and Mobilization component, Amtrak, in close coordination with FEMA and subject matter experts from the Department of Transportation’s (DOT) Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), developed an Operating Plan to implement this contract. Since the focus of the support was for the State of Louisiana and the City of New Orleans, each played a critical role in developing the plan. The Operating Plan clarifies the

operational aspects of a precautionary evacuation of an ambulatory general population potentially facing a catastrophic level disaster (Category III or greater hurricane). The Plan supports 6,000 evacuees being transported by rail from New Orleans' Union Passenger Terminal to the Memphis, Tennessee Rail Depot using two 24-car trains, each with a 1,500 person capacity. Each train would make two trips in a 48-hour evacuation window. The Plan also incorporates a screening process for registration, manifest of passengers being transported, temporary surrender of weapons, medical screening (verified ambulatory), and a provision for providing every evacuee with a food and water.

Public health and medical concerns were addressed by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in the Operating Plan. Under the Operating Plan, HHS would provide two Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) on each emergency evacuation train. These EMTs would have appropriate equipment and medical caches to perform basic life-saving and patient stabilization procedures, and if needed would provide this service to the evacuee population while in transit. The EMTs would also coordinate the transport of acute care patients from the train to Emergency Medical Services/definitive care organizations closest to the train. The medical support staff would remain on the trains until the mission is completed.

## **CHALLENGES OF RAIL EVACUATIONS**

Despite the substantial planning that has been accomplished to support Louisiana and New Orleans, there are still challenges that will need to be addressed regarding rail evacuation planning and readiness for future disasters. Many of these same challenges are likely applicable to other cities and rail systems.

DOT's "Catastrophic Hurricane Evacuation Plan Evaluation, June 1, 2006" highlighted the importance of transportation planning. There are broad rail evacuation challenges that we face.

First, planning efforts are often quite complicated and require detailed involvement by many jurisdictions and across multiple agencies. Utilizing passenger rail for evacuations during major disasters/national emergencies not only requires detailed planning efforts, it requires the technical skills of individuals experienced in rail systems. The emergency management community has insufficient personnel, specifically subject matter experts, qualified in evacuation planning. Additionally, no planning effort is complete without exercising plans.

Second, we must ensure that States fully leverage standardized, scientifically-based risk assessments available for planning. These assessments, coupled with a capabilities inventory based on gap analyses, can lead to more reliable plans. States may not be accustomed to using such techniques due to a lack of training, inadequate funding, and personnel shortages.

Third, to facilitate evacuation planning and use of all modes of available transportation, States need to develop and take advantage of Mutual Aid Agreements, memoranda of understanding, and contracts. Often, developing these instruments cannot occur until near the end of the planning cycle, coming after risk assessments, gap analyses, capability inventories and concepts of operation are well underway. This issue was acknowledged previously in a Government Accountability Office Report. (Report 07-44, December 2006.)

In addition to the broad evacuation challenges mentioned above, there are specific rail evacuation challenges I want to mention.

- **Different railroads own the tracks.** As I am sure this Committee knows, the vast majority of railroad right-of-ways that are used for passenger rail service is in fact owned by private, freight railroad companies, and the use of such right-of-ways by passenger rail entities is governed by established agreements. For example, in New Orleans, the northern route to Chicago was considered by Amtrak to be the most technically feasible for evacuations because of existing lease agreements and Amtrak's regular operations on this line. Amtrak has current lease agreements with other railroads and their train crews are approved to operate on a limited number of these right-of-ways. Also, each railroad independently determines when they will cease operations in the face of an approaching hurricane. The existence of these agreements and the close cooperation of each railroad line in use are critical to the planning effort.
- **Determining where the trains will go.** Unlike coordinating evacuations via bus, or personal vehicle, coordinating evacuations by rail requires a higher level of planning as a result of additional logistical requirements. Evacuation of a population by rail requires the collection or coordination of a large number of individuals from diverse locations to a fixed starting point, and the forward transportation of that population to a fixed destination. Because a train can only operate on fixed track, destination locations must be identified in advance of any event, and the response community of that destination location must be prepared to receive the evacuees. In particular, once the evacuee population has reached the destination, the recipient State and local governments and responders must be able to provide adequate services, such as forward transportation and sheltering. As a result, the destination location(s) must be mutually agreed upon by the evacuating State, recipient State and local government, FEMA and its operational partners, and Amtrak. Those coordinating the evacuation must be assured that arrival locations are suitable for a safe unloading operation and that arrangements are in place to care for the evacuees.
- **Evacuation Law Enforcement Issues.** In executing planning for the 2007 hurricane season, Amtrak indicated its desire to have an Amtrak police officer in each rail car. Because of the size of the Amtrak police force, and the requirement to maintain normal operations, it is unlikely that Amtrak police could be stationed in every car. This will require prearranged agreements for additional law enforcement officers to supplement existing forces. Depending on the immediacy of the need, and the availability of support agencies, this could pose a limiting factor.
- **Special Needs Passengers.** Without additional major structural modification, the typical passenger rail car can only transport ambulatory evacuees and a limited number of limited mobility passengers. In addition, Amtrak is not capable of conveying special medical needs passengers, such as those on stretchers. Trains can accommodate a limited number of ambulatory or wheelchair bound patients not needing medical attention and medical staff. Amtrak can accurately track the location and type of carriage, and can provide an estimate of the number of wheelchairs that can be accommodated on each train.

- **Prepositioning of adequate capacity to support an evacuation.** In order to be prepared for a potential evacuation, equipment and personnel were required to be prepositioned in New Orleans, at a cost of approximately \$ 700,000 in 2007. In the longer term, FEMA will consider the feasibility of applying this evacuation model to other regions of the country.

The planning efforts we have undertaken with Louisiana exemplify the type of emergency planning envisioned in the National Preparedness Guidelines—a multi-jurisdictional, interagency planning endeavor that promotes unity of effort and determines actions, policies and processes to be followed in advance of an actual emergency. New Orleans is only one of many cities in States at risk from hurricanes that could take advantage of incorporating passenger rail into their local and State emergency planning efforts. FEMA will encourage and support additional urban areas to adopt this type of planning initiative. We will continue to offer similar technical assistance to other Gulf Coast States that would like to take advantage of this evacuation planning model. I will be pleased to respond to any questions.