

**Statement Of  
The Honorable James L. Oberstar  
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and  
Emergency Management  
Field Hearing On  
“Post Katrina: What it Takes to Cut the Bureaucracy and Assure a  
More Rapid Response After A Catastrophic Disaster”  
July 27, 2009**

Today, the Committee will receive testimony on what steps the Federal Government, including Congress, can and should take to prepare for, respond to, recover from, and mitigate the risks of a catastrophic disaster.

In deciding whether and how to prescribe requirements and assistance applicable to a catastrophic disaster, beyond what is already available under the Stafford Act for a “major disaster” or “emergency,” the first step is to determine what constitutes a catastrophe. As many of today’s witnesses point out, defining a catastrophe in statute is not an easy task, especially if it is to be a trigger for extraordinary Federal authority. While every disaster is a catastrophe for the individuals and communities affected by the event, Congress must take a broader national view.

Hurricane Katrina was undeniably a catastrophe, and one of the worst natural disasters in our nation’s history. Yet recent international events remind us of the wrath of Mother Nature and the destruction that can occur, such as the 2004 tsunami that struck in the Indian Ocean and the earthquake that struck China last year. These events killed hundreds of thousands of people, left millions homeless, and caused an incredible amount of destruction to communities and infrastructure. Unfortunately events of this magnitude are possible in this country. We owe it to our citizens and communities to be properly prepared for such events and mitigate the risks in the best manner possible to limit the destruction to property and the loss of life.

If we provide additional authority to address catastrophic events, it is clear that that authority must build upon the existing emergency management system, overseen at the Federal level by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which has served our citizens well in countless disasters.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, when large or unusual disasters struck, FEMA worked with Congress to provide specific and targeted solutions to the problems identified in the recovery to those disasters. Unfortunately, after Hurricane Katrina, FEMA was not the flexible independent agency it once was; rather it was buried in the bureaucracy of the Department of Homeland Security.

Today, despite the modest reforms Congress enacted in the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006, FEMA remains entrenched in DHS. My opposition to this has been clear, and I continue to strongly believe that FEMA should be made an independent cabinet-level agency.

In the current reality, however, we may not be able to count on FEMA to have the authority to work quickly with Congress in the aftermath of a catastrophic disaster. For these

reasons, we may need to be more prescriptive in statute than has previously been necessary, to provide FEMA with clear authority in the event of a disaster of catastrophic magnitude.

We will hear from witnesses today who have extensive knowledge and experience in emergency management who together can help this Committee build a record on what needs to be done to prepare for, respond to, recover from, and mitigate the risks of catastrophic disasters. I welcome each of you and look forward to your testimony.

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