

**Statement Of  
The Honorable Eleanor Holmes Norton  
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’s hearing will address very important new and unsolved questions that hurricane Katrina raised for our country for the first time: What is a catastrophic disaster? What is the role of the federal government before, during and after these events? Is additional authority needed to address response and recovery from these events? We cannot sit by and merely hope that outsized disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina and 9/11, will never occur again. Our obligation to the public requires investigation by this subcommittee to prepare us for these contingencies.

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005, and proved to be the most costly natural disaster in American history. Congress, and particularly, this subcommittee, have spent the nearly four years since Katrina looking at the action of the federal government, as well as state and local governments, voluntary agencies and citizens themselves, from response to recovery, which continues to this day.

Today’s hearing focuses on next steps. What have we learned from Hurricane Katrina, as well as from other disasters in the United States and around the world, concerning what should be done to respond to catastrophic disasters and to facilitate recovery? Most important, what steps should all concerned be taking now to prepare for and mitigate the risks to lives and property from these events?

The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act) was signed into law on November 23, 1988, but it is not clear that the Congress contemplated gargantuan disasters, with recovery proceeding for years. The Act, authorized by our Committee, is the federal government’s primary authority for addressing major disasters, from all hazards and events. For the most part, this authority has proven sufficient to address all types of disasters and emergencies, but it is an open question whether the Stafford Act is sufficient when measured against the background that Hurricane Katrina now provides.

The Stafford Act and our nation’s emergency management system are grounded in our federal system of government that recognizes that the primary responsibility to address disasters and emergencies resides with states and communities, not the federal government. As a result, the assistance provided after a disaster is, as the Stafford Act provides, to “supplement the efforts and available resources of states, local governments and disaster relief organizations.”

However, it is already clear that one characteristic that distinguishes catastrophic disasters from other disasters is that the magnitude of a huge disaster often has national impact, rather than effects limited largely to a particular state or community. We must,

therefore, re-evaluate the role of the federal government, as well as FEMA's authority, policies, and regulations that presume federal assistance is always supplemental regardless of the disaster. The Stafford Act's existing authority and systems for the emergencies and disasters are so detailed and time-proven that this landmark statute provides the necessary base for additions or revision, if needed.

However defined, Katrina teaches that catastrophic disasters are complex, unusually, large in effects, hard to predict and expensive. Moreover, they are distinguishable because they require months rather than days or weeks to move from response to recovery. inevitably, therefore, the subcommittee cannot avoid the question, whether new extraordinary authority should be given to the President in advance and whether Congress should provide for the recovery from catastrophic disasters that is specific and targeted to the size of these unusually large and pervasive events.

The subcommittee looks forward to hearing the testimony of today's witnesses to help us address how we can prepare for these catastrophic events. We particularly welcome Administrator Fugate, who has recently taken office and is testifying before this committee for the first time.

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