

Remarks by Secretary Napolitano and FEMA Administrator Fugate at Today's Media Availability on Hurricane Preparedness



Release Date: May 19, 2009

For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
Contact 202-282-8010
Washington, D.C.

Secretary Napolitano: Good afternoon. The President asked [Federal Emergency Management Agency] Administrator [Craig] Fugate and I to get together with hurricane state governors to discuss preparedness in the upcoming hurricane season. The President wants all of us to be engaged, working together as hurricane season gets underway.

So we just had a great teleconference with governors of the hurricane states, with FEMA regional administrators, and representatives of our many federal partners. As you know, we always book hurricane season as beginning June 1. Preparations actually are ongoing all year long. It's just by this time of the year, those preparations increase.

I'm very pleased to have standing with me today Craig Fugate. I had the honor of swearing him in as the new FEMA administrator this afternoon. Craig has 25 years of disaster management experience at the local and state level. Most recently, he was the director of emergency management for the state of Florida. He successfully led the response efforts in 2004 when Florida was affected by four major hurricanes—Charlie, Frances, Ivan, and Jeanne. Craig has a wealth of experience in this area. I'm looking forward to working with him and to his leadership.

Now, today's televideo conference was part of bringing some attention to the issue of hurricane preparedness. And as I said earlier, we don't view this as the launch of hurricane preparedness, but intensification as we head into the actual season. Two weeks ago we held a principal-level federal exercise here in Washington, D.C., also involving hurricane preparedness and including a number of my fellow members of the Cabinet, as well as members of the White House staff and, indeed, the President himself for part of it.

We want to make sure that the public is engaged and that we are redoubling our efforts to fill any gaps that we find as we prepare. That is why it is so critical that we work now with governors and with FEMA offices around the country, that we listen, and that we are in a position to respond. We have a deep belief, Craig and I—we both come out of states and out of the state systems for emergency response. We know how important it is that states, localities, tribes—they are at the front end. They are the first responders. They know best what they need. We are there to back them up, to provide them with support. Craig and I will both be in Florida later this week to actually view preparations there as we head into the season.

In addition, we've undertaken a number of improvements at FEMA over the past months as we prepare. And under the title of better organization, we have provided additional support for regional evacuation planning and state emergency communications plans, as well as increased options for temporary housing in the event of a disaster.

Under the heading of better coordination, we have a new national shelter system, which is a coordinated data system containing information for thousands of emergency shelter resources nationwide. And we are better connected. As today's video teleconference makes clear, we can now communicate on a real-time basis simultaneously across a number of states and jurisdictions so that we can share information and work together on specific issues.

I also, under the headline of shared responsibility, want to emphasize things that individuals can and should be doing in their own preparation for hurricane season. Make sure you know what to do and where you will go in case you have to evacuate ahead of a storm. Have a plan to communicate with family members. Have supplies that you may need to evacuate and to protect your property. Everyone has a role to play, and if we all play our roles, we will be assured of better success at the end of the season.

Now I'd like to turn it over to the new—and newly sworn in—FEMA administrator, Craig Fugate, so he can discuss his vision for the agency. Craig?

Administrator Fugate: Well, thank you, Madam Secretary. I think when you listen to the Secretary's comment, the one thing you keep coming across and the theme that, you know, she shared with me as we were going through this process is our responsibility at DHS [U.S. Department of Homeland Security] and FEMA, representing the President and the Secretary as the principal incident manager for the President when supporting governors in disasters, is it's a team effort.

And the tendency is we look at what individual components are going to do. And we have to remember that if there's any failure at any level of the components, the whole team fails, and that we have to really look at how do we support our local officials through our governors—how we work together as the federal family of agencies for the President and for the Secretary in supporting those governors.

But I think she hit upon one thing that I cannot emphasize enough, and it's a message that I continue to espouse but I think people forget: we're only going to be as successful as the public is in preparing, that there are a lot of folks that are going to need very specific help that should not have to compete with the rest of us who could have and should have done the things to protect our families because we know that in a disaster, there are many challenges that we're all going to face.

And I'll boil it down to—you know, usually rules of three are pretty good things to get across. Okay. I've got three things I'd like everybody to do. Get a family disaster plan. Two, go take a Red Cross or first aid training. Learn a skill. And last, when disaster strikes—and we don't know what the next disaster is going to be; we're talking about hurricane seasons but, you know, we've got fires, tornadoes, we're dealing with H1N1—but oftentimes, when disaster strikes, once you make sure you and your family are okay, do one more thing: check on a neighbor. We'll save more lives in this nation if we realize that oftentimes, the best resource in the immediate aftermath of that tornado could be something as simple as—once you and your family are okay, check on a neighbor.

We can deal with these challenges as a team. But it's a team. It isn't one part of the government. It's not one level of the government. It's not just government. It's all of us.

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This page was last reviewed/modified on May 19, 2009.