Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina

Tom Davis, Chairman

"Hurricane Katrina: Preparedness and Response by the State of Alabama"

Wednesday, November 9, 2005
10:00 am
2154, Rayburn House Office Building

Chairman's Opening Statement

WITNESS LIST

PANEL ONE

The Honorable Bob Riley
Governor
State of Alabama
PANEL TWO

Mr. Bruce Baughman
Director
Alabama State Emergency Management Agency

Mr. Jim Walker
Director
Alabama Department of Homeland Security

Mr. Walter Dickerson
Director
Mobile County Emergency Management Agency

Ms. Leigh Anne Ryals
Director
Baldwin County Emergency Management Agency
Baldwin County, Alabama

Mr. Michael Bolch
Federal Coordinating Officer
Federal Emergency Management Agency
Good morning, and welcome to this morning’s hearing on the State of Alabama’s preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina.

We have spent the last two months examining this catastrophic disaster. It has become increasingly clear that local, state, and federal agencies failed to meet the needs of the residents of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

Our hearings thus far have revealed plenty of heroes and plenty of goats. We’ve begun demystifying the process of emergency management, beginning with what is and is not the province of the federal government.

It’s no doubt true that many Americans falsely view FEMA as some sort of national fire and rescue team. So we focused early on FEMA’s role and responsibilities, getting an accurate description for the record of what FEMA is – what it can and cannot do based on what it is actually charged with doing.

We all know now that FEMA is not a first responder agency with the resources to assume principal responsibility for overwhelmed state and local governments during a disaster.

And that’s probably a good thing. I continue to believe the worst lesson to be learned from Katrina is that all answers reside in Washington.

But just because they’re not “first responders” doesn’t mean we can excuse a response that was at best second class.

Today we turn our attention to Alabama, in what will be the first of three hearings focused on state and local preparation and response, and state and local coordination with the federal government. We’ll continue asking the same tough questions we’ve asked of federal witnesses at our previous hearings.

How policy implementation became so wildly divorced from policy creation.

Why there seemed to be such profound government hesitancy at all levels.

Why we appear to have confused getting the government ready with getting people ready.

We are well prepared for today’s hearing, in large part due to the cooperation we have received from Governor Riley and his staff. State documents arrived on time, and for that we are grateful. Select Committee staff traveled to Alabama the week of October
10th to interview state officials, review documents, and visit the Emergency Operations Center and the Red Cross Regional Operations Center.

With the help of our witnesses today, we hope to fill in the blanks.

We all know by now that in the event of an emergency, state and local government officials bear responsibilities under both the National Response Plan and their own laws and directives.

This hearing will explore Alabama’s laws, policies, procedures, and its interface with the Department of Homeland Security and FEMA when confronting the prospect or reality of a catastrophic disaster.

We’ll look at the respective roles of the Governor, the Directors of the Alabama Emergency Management Office, the Director of the Alabama Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management Directors from Mobile and Baldwin counties, the areas hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina.

The National Response Plan (NRP) and the National Incident Management System (NIMS) were crafted to provide the framework and template, respectively, for the federal government to work with state and local authorities to prepare for and respond to crises. In turn, states, localities, tribal governments, and nongovernmental organizations are asked to align their plans and procedures with federal guidelines and procedures.

Alabama has established both a Department of Homeland Security and an Alabama Emergency Management Agency (AEMA). During a crisis, the AEMA activates an Emergency Operations Center organized around the fifteen Emergency Support Functions outlined in the NRP.

How the Governor, AEMA personnel, and local officials conducted response operations during Hurricane Katrina, as well as how well the federal government provided support, are of primary interest to our investigation. Specifically, what occurs at the state and local level during catastrophic incidents when local resources are overwhelmed and when, if ever, is it appropriate for the federal government to step in?

What this Committee is doing isn’t rocket science.

We’re gathering facts and establishing timelines based on some fairly rudimentary but important questions posed to the right people at all levels of government.

What did you need and what did you get?

Where were you in the days and hours right before, during, and after the storm? Who were you talking to? What were you doing?

Does that match what you were supposed to be doing? Why or why not?
In other words, we’re matching what was supposed to happen under federal, state, and local plans against what actually happened.

Our findings will emerge from this process of matching.

As we’ll again discover today, government did not fail people because of a lack of plans. Government failed from a lack of initiative. Government failed because it did not learn from past experiences.

There were plans, but there was not enough planning.

I think we’ll hear from our Alabama witnesses today that often there were too many cooks in the kitchen, and because of that the response to Katrina was at times overcooked, at times undercooked.

Because everybody was in charge, nobody was in charge.

I don’t want to unduly preview what we’ll hear from our witnesses today, nor do I want to suggest that all went well in Alabama, because it didn’t. But I do think we’ve already learned some lessons from our friends in Alabama.

Like many other state officials, Alabama’s leaders are concerned that in the post-9/11 environment, undue emphasis – primarily in the form of federal funding -- is placed on terrorism-based hazards, when natural disasters pose a much more likely, perhaps inevitable, risk.

I expect we’ll hear today that FEMA’s logistics system is broken. Take commodity procurement, for example. Alabama officials have expressed frustration over FEMA’s tendency to second-guess or discount validated, data-driven state requests for commodities and equipment. Ask for 100 trucks, FEMA decides you only need 16.

Concerns have also been raised about seemingly arbitrary restrictions on FEMA recovery and mitigation funds. It’s a mystery to me, for example, why funds would be available to buy stationary electrical generators, but not portable ones.

Applying the lessons learned from Hurricane Ivan, the state upgraded the tracking system used to determine hospital bed vacancies giving state officials real-time visibility of surge capacity. This made it possible to direct those with special medical needs. But then HHS activated the National Disaster Medical System without prior notice or consultation with Alabama, taking 200 beds from the inventory the state believed on hand, and to which state officials were still directing patients.

Likewise, Coast Guard search and rescue operations were bringing survivors from Mississippi unannounced to already full hospitals until Alabama sent its own personnel forward to help triage cases and coordinate the direction of Coast Guard flights.
The state-focused hearings we begin today will highlight one of the most prevalent shortcomings our investigation is uncovering – a complete breakdown in communication and coordination. A glaring absence of information sharing.

As we did after 9/11, we are again realizing that we are still an analog government in a digital age. Again realizing that we are woefully incapable of storing, moving and accessing information.

Information would have been an optimal weapon against Katrina. Information moved to the right people at the right place at the right time. Information moved within agencies and across departments. And information moved across jurisdictions of government as well. Seamlessly. Securely. Efficiently.

Unfortunately, no government does these things well, especially big governments.

We spend $150 billion a year on information technology. You’d think we could share information by now.

I look forward to having Alabama officials share their story with us today.
Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today to speak with you about the State of Alabama’s preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina. I commend this committee, the Congress and the Administration for undertaking a close examination of natural disaster preparedness and response. Two members of my Cabinet – Bruce Baughman, the Director of the Alabama Emergency Management Agency, and Jim Walker, the Director of the Alabama Department of Homeland Security – are with me today. Also joining us are the county EMA directors for Alabama’s two coastal counties – Walt Dickerson of Mobile County and Leigh Anne Ryals of Baldwin County.

While Directors Baughman and Walker will talk specifically about Alabama’s preparedness and response plans, commodity and equipments needs, funding allocations and other items of interest, I would like to briefly touch on Alabama’s general approach to emergency management, some of the lessons we’ve learned, and the role of the federal government.

Hurricane Katrina was Alabama’s third hurricane in a period of 11 months. As I said at the time Hurricane Katrina approached our shores, this was not our first rodeo. With each storm there were lessons learned at both the state and local levels of government in Alabama. We continue to learn lessons and improve our system after each disaster.

One of the lessons we’ve learned and applied is the absolute necessity of having a comprehensive emergency management program in place long before disaster strikes. We’ve spent the last two-and-a-half years in Alabama developing this comprehensive program and continually improving it as more lessons are learned. It includes extensive year-round planning and training exercises, a clear command structure, and strong communication efforts between local, state and federal agencies. As a result of this planning, Alabama has successfully responded to each of the three major hurricanes we’ve faced since August 2004.

Our year-round planning and training exercises are conducted with one goal in mind: to prepare our communities so we can save lives. As you’ll hear from Bruce Baughman
later, our efforts included dozens of emergency management exercises and hurricane workshops to familiarize emergency managers and state agencies with the risks that come from hurricanes. Our year-round planning helps us anticipate the needs and challenges of each community before a crisis occurs.

These training exercises also extend to ensuring an efficient evacuation from Alabama’s coast. Plans to reverse traffic on Interstate 65, so that all vehicles travel north away from the coast, have been developed, practiced and implemented by our state Department of Transportation and Department of Public Safety. This reverse-laning has been put to use in two of the three hurricanes that have impacted Alabama during the past two years. This process is more complex than most would imagine and requires 244 transportation and public safety workers to safely accomplish. This effort obviously requires a great deal of planning and coordination – essential components of any successful emergency management program. And I’m proud that in all three hurricanes, Alabama has suffered no loss of life due to failure to evacuate.

Alabama’s emergency response team is made up of numerous agencies at all levels of government. Members of the Alabama National Guard and state law enforcement officers work side-by-side with local police and emergency responders. Volunteers with the Red Cross join state and local organizations and our faith-based community to provide aid and comfort to those in need. The partners that join us in preparing and responding to disasters are too numerous to list for you today. However, Alabama’s team is led by a unified command, which is critical to a successful effort. During disasters, I designate Bruce Baughman, Director of Emergency Management, to serve as the chief coordinating officer of our state response. He reports directly to me and works with all agencies. Bruce has an extensive background in emergency management, having served as one of the highest-ranking officials at FEMA before becoming Alabama’s EMA director.

Under this unified command structure, Alabama EMA coordinated our combined federal, state and local response to Katrina and carried out an extensive communications effort to our affected local communities. Good information delivered in a timely manner is one of the biggest challenges that any state or organization faces in dealing with a crisis. We are in virtually constant contact with our local emergency managers and local officials – and in an effort to keep the public informed – we make it a priority to brief the media on a regular basis. We are also in virtually constant contact with our federal partners prior to landfall, during landfall and post-landfall. We conduct twice daily teleconferences with federal agencies and surrounding states. This communication allows us to share information, identify needs and move forward with our response.

Natural disasters will always be chaotic situations. But with proper planning and preparation, it is possible to respond quickly, restore order and begin recovery efforts.

Alabama has made great strides in our hurricane preparation and response efforts. We’ve planned and practiced. However, no system will ever be perfect. That’s why we continue working to address identified needs and vulnerabilities. One improvement we
are in the process of making is establishing minimum standards for all our local emergency managers. Alabama has established a system for distributing emergency planning dollars to counties based on their progress toward complying with the Emergency Management Accreditation Program standards. And we’re one of the first states to do so. Our program requires specified experience, education and training to ensure all our emergency managers are well versed in the fundamentals of emergency planning and response. As a result, Alabama is making our state and local agencies more accountable.

While the federal government plays an important role, it is state and local officials who should be responsible for emergency management. This system of emergency preparation and response works well when everyone understands and accepts their responsibilities. The most effective response to disasters must start at the local level. I’ve always compared the appropriate roles this way: the federal government is like a battleship. It can bring enormous firepower and resources. But it takes some time for it to get to the crisis area. State and local governments are more like speedboats. We will never have the resources of the federal government, but we will always be the first to arrive.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many have concluded that all the answers are to be found in Washington, DC. As a former Member of Congress, I recognize that the federal government has a unique and critically important role to play in responding to catastrophes. However, state and local leaders must always retain the primary role in planning and acting as first responders. Congress should avoid attempts to “federalize” planning and response activities that are the responsibility of state and local agencies. Instead, Congress should focus its efforts on ensuring that the states and local communities have the necessary resources and flexibility to effectively implement their preparedness and emergency response plans. For example, I believe that Congress should examine additional funding streams to allow hurricane-prone states to pre-stage commodities such as water and MREs. We also need to examine current federal funding triggers to ensure that there is not a disincentive for states to adequately prepare and quickly respond to disasters.

In my opinion, the current system is not broken, but, like most things, there’s always room for improvement. I’m confident that the work of this committee will assist us in our efforts to continuously improve the system.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify and I will be happy to answer any questions.
Good morning. My name is Bruce Baughman. I am the Director of the Alabama Emergency Management Agency. I wish to thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of this Committee for providing me this opportunity to testify regarding our response to Hurricane Katrina.

My testimony today is focused on Alabama’s Emergency Management program, and how we prepared for and responded to Hurricane Katrina. During the last two and a half years, we have developed a comprehensive emergency management program that includes well coordinated, trained, and exercised plans, procedures, and personnel. As a result of our efforts we have successfully responded to three hurricanes within the past 13 months. This success has not come easily; it has taken the commitment of local governments, state agency heads, and political leadership at all levels of government within the state. Additionally, under Governor Riley’s leadership, emergency management has become a priority for his administration. The result is that within emergency management we have been able to develop strong relationships with key state agencies, the state legislature, and local governments. These relationships have paid big dividends in responding to disasters and emergencies. Areas that have been strengthened include training, exercises, logistics, mutual aid, communications, mass care, health and medical, fire and rescue, and evacuation.

Our response to Hurricane Katrina was built around our established plans and procedures which were augmented by lessons learned from previous disasters, especially Hurricane Ivan. On August 26th, we identified the threat from Katrina and began preparations and pre-planning. We notified key state agencies, dispatched liaisons to coastal counties, activated the State Emergency Response Team, and activated the Alabama Mutual Aid System. We talked to FEMA Region IV, and began twice daily teleconferences with federal agencies and surrounding states. We requested FEMA’s Emergency Response Team – Advance Element, which arrived on August 27th.
We determined the projected quantities of commodities and emergency teams that would be required, and requested that FEMA pre-stage them at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery. Due to the magnitude of Hurricane Katrina, and the number of states affected, FEMA was able to provide one million gallons of water, seven million pounds of ice, and 1.3 million Meals Ready to Eat.

Governor Riley’s Office and the Alabama Emergency Management Agency coordinated a combined federal, state, and local response to Katrina that was extremely effective. Katrina caused only two deaths in our state, and those victims died in an automobile accident.

The success of our State program depends on far more than just the Alabama Emergency Management Agency. We depend on our close partnership with state agencies, such as the Alabama National Guard, the Departments of Public Safety, Public Health, Transportation, and others. We depend on our federal partners at FEMA, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Department of Defense, and many others as well. But most of all, regardless of where you are in the emergency management community, successful and efficient operations are significantly dependent on the strength of local emergency management agencies, and most importantly, the involvement of political leadership. We depend on these local emergency management directors to communicate with their elected officials and communities as they effectively coordinate with us at the State level to meet their emergency management support and needs. The information they provide us drives the disaster response at the state and federal level. After all, we are not first responders, but emergency managers, and our job is to support local government with resources when their own resources are exhausted.

It is the job of emergency managers to coordinate the development of plans to describe how all these organizations will work together. These plans exist at the local, state, and federal level. Each plan describes how they will secure assistance from their neighbors or next higher level of government when their own resources are exhausted. However, emergency plans are not documents that are written and placed on a bookshelf, only to be forgotten until the next disaster; rather they are living documents, subject to constant testing and revision. Plans exist at the core of any emergency management program, second only to emergency managers themselves in being essential to the program.

It is often said in emergency management that plans are useless, planning is essential. The plan itself can do nothing. But people who understand the plan, its component organizations, and its procedures for protecting people and requesting outside assistance are well positioned to effectively respond to a disaster. Alabama EMA reviews and approves the counties’ plans, and ensures they follow current guidance related to all aspects of disaster response. Alabama has written its State Emergency Operations Plan to mirror the National Response Plan, in terms of organizational structure, so each level of government is well positioned to work with one another.

Training and exercises are major components of any emergency management program. Last year we conducted 59 federal, state, and local exercises. We have conducted hurricane exercises with coastal county Emergency Management Agencies. We have conducted exercises for Governor
Riley and his cabinet. In addition, we have held hurricane workshops to further orient emergency managers to the risks associated with hurricanes and the agencies that respond to them.

Exercises may have different target audiences, but share the same goal, which is to raise awareness of how emergency plans will be implemented. Exercises are well funded through Homeland Security Grants, with one exception that I wish to raise regarding exercise funding. Currently, federal exercise funding with the Department of Homeland Security must be terrorism or Weapons of Mass Destruction oriented, which inserts artificiality when we conduct natural hazards exercises. Our exercises would be more realistic if this element was not required.

Training is used as an effective tool to introduce emergency managers and first responders to disaster specific topics. The federal government can provide leadership here by developing or sponsoring detailed training in the National Incident Management System and the Incident Command System. Additional training areas in need of federal leadership are logistics, damage assessments, and Incident Action Planning. Emergency management training is not simply a matter of funding; a federal agency, logically the Federal Emergency Management Agency, should be charged with developing or facilitating the development of training in these areas.

Let me now mention a few major issues facing the emergency management community in preparing for natural disasters. Funding, of course, is a major concern for all government programs. The Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG) is the states’ only source of funding for natural hazards preparedness. The State of Alabama received $3 million in EMPG last year, the majority of which was passed on to county emergency management programs. Compare this to the $22 million we received for the Chemical Stockpile Emergency Preparedness Program (CSEPP) affecting only six counties in Alabama, or $25 million for Terrorism and Preparedness, or $750,000 for the Radiological Emergency Preparedness Program (REP) affecting only two nuclear power plants. The disparities in funding are obvious, and the challenges associated with EMPG funding are a major problem facing emergency management.

To establish accountability in the allocation of EMPG funds, Alabama has established a system for distributing dollars to counties based on their progress towards compliance with the Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP) standards. EMAP is a tool for examining emergency management programs and evaluating their readiness to respond to disasters. Additionally, under Governor Riley’s leadership, Alabama has implemented one of the nation’s first programs of minimum standards for emergency managers. Our program requires specified experience, education, and training to ensure our emergency managers are well versed in the fundamentals of disaster response.

Alabama concurs with the Department of Homeland Security that federal funding should be threat based. However, natural disasters should be factored in and used as a basis for funding. Alabama has been struck repeatedly by natural disasters; we have received 31 federal declarations in the past ten years. It is my recommendation to you that Congress consider increasing EMPG funding across the board, and reenergizing the Hurricane Preparedness and Earthquake Preparedness Programs.
Alabama used Homeland Security funds to purchase equipment for the recently established Alabama Mutual Aid System (AMAS). AMAS consists of 47 standardized teams located across the state, such as Heavy Rescue, Medium Rescue, Light Rescue, Swiftwater Rescue, and Hazardous Materials. AMAS provides Alabama cities and counties assistance to one another, rather than depending on state or federal assets.

With Homeland Security funds, Alabama ordered eight mobile communications vehicles. We are still in the process of completing communications plans in each county to identify specific communications resource shortfalls. We use the Southern LINC network as our primary method for communicating with county EMAs and those involved in disaster response. The Southern LINC network, which uses the same technology as Nextel, is commercially owned and operated, so the cost to the state is manageable. The National Weather Service provides regular briefings to all state and county EMA employees via the Southern LINC network. There were approximately 115 additional LINC portable units activated and delivered for use in the field for this disaster.

We purchased six (6) additional satellite telephones for Hurricane Katrina, bringing the total number to 19. These satellite telephones were distributed to personnel in the field and worked very well. We are in the process of rebuilding our statewide UHF radio network, which will provide an additional layer of redundancy should the Southern LINC network fail. We encountered no communications problems during Hurricane Katrina.

We have also established, as an emergency support function, a liaison with private relief organizations. Governor Riley has established a new office under his administration, the Governor’s Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives. This office coordinated and provided appropriate support from volunteer agencies such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventist Services, and others. This office has provided on-site manpower support in our Emergency Operations Center so that the coordination between the State and the volunteer relief organizations is enhanced. For example, instead of having a Salvation Army and a Red Cross food canteen on the same street, we are making sure that we are spreading the resources out to avoid duplication of services.

Governor Riley possesses the legal authority under Alabama law to issue a mandatory evacuation order and he does so at the recommendation and request of local government. Once such an order is issued, then the evacuation process is initiated. Our office coordinates with the counties and with our state agencies, specifically Department of Transportation and Department of Public Safety, for the implementation of such evacuation.

The information we use for evacuation decision making is based on studies conducted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The evacuation clearance times reflected in these reports is, I believe, incomplete and outdated based upon the data models that we are using. We are basically showing a clearance time of 22 – 24 hours to complete an evacuation of our communities. I personally do not think that this clearance time is any longer valid. Additional funding is needed for the Corps of Engineers to complete and update these studies. On a state level, we need to re-
evaluate our evacuation plans and reduce the clearance times or properly reflect accurate data in our reports.

In the context of evacuation, we feel the greatest need for improvement is in interstate coordination. If a storm headed towards the Gulf Coast takes a westerly turn, it will strike Louisiana first and then Mississippi. Therefore, Alabama will receive traffic from evacuees of those states along our Interstate 10, which is a major East-West Interstate route, which then presents a problem to Alabama because we in turn need to route them north, by way of Interstate 65. We feel that there needs to be more of a formalized process for interstate coordination of evacuation between neighboring states. We believe federal government can provide us greater assistance in accomplishing our objective of moving traffic from other states through Alabama. Alabama may not be under a direct threat of a disaster; however, Alabama would be directly affected and would incur expenses in providing safe and expedited travel from these states to communities in Alabama out of harm’s way.

We have implemented two significant methods of evacuating our coastal counties, one of which is known as zoned evacuation, where coastal counties are divided into zones to facilitate public notification when a hurricane is approaching, and the other is a contra-flow traffic process; whereby we reverse-lane Interstate 65 in order to route traffic in a more efficient manner. Not all states with an interstate route are capable of doing the contra-flow method. However, it would behoove states and the federal government to work in a cooperative effort to develop a means in which to better prepare these evacuation routes in order to become capable of using the contra-flow method.

FEMA has established an Evacuation Liaison Team (ELT) which participated in daily conference calls with the state to coordinate interstate evacuation. I think it can be better; however, the ELT is primarily being used only in FEMA, Region IV based in Atlanta, which presents a problem for states that are outside that particular region. It does not encompass states in areas west of the Mississippi River, like Louisiana. It would be my recommendation that this ELT process needs to be established and replicated in all ten (10) FEMA Regions. Historically, there has been some resistance from the Department of Transportation from their Regional Emergency Transportation Coordinators (RETCOs) from region to region in developing and enhancing this evacuation liaison team concept. In summary regarding the ELT, I clearly think it can be improved upon a federal level between the FEMA Regional Offices. However, as for the ELT process during Katrina, it worked very well for the State of Alabama.

Based upon our exercises and lessons learned from previous disasters we have been able to assess our need for commodities and equipment that are necessary during the initial days prior to a disaster entering the state and shortly after leaving the state. We have identified our need on the state level to provide certain emergency management support to our local governments such as in the areas of ice, water, meals ready to eat (MREs), generators, cots, and roofing supplies.

Alabama believes, and my experience supports such a belief, that each hurricane prone state needs to establish a warehouse stocked with a modest amount of these commodities so that they are readily accessible for immediate distribution to a disaster impacted community. Time is of
the essence when it comes to our response to the immediate needs of the community. Therefore, we recommend that a properly stocked warehouse be established in each state, as appropriate.

We have been able to identify what we believe is an adequate or appropriate amount of money and an accurate list of commodities that are necessary to accomplish this warehouse mission. However, the problem is that the cost incurred in this particular project in most cases is beyond the capability of state government. Therefore, we are asking for FEMA’s assistance in funding such an initiative. Alabama’s greatest concern is the timeliness of receiving commodities, such as ice, water, and meals ready to eat into the state once the storm makes landfall so that we can make distribution to our customers as soon as it is safe to do so. This is the basis of our belief that the aforementioned volume of commodities need to be established, pre-staged, and warehoused prior to the storm making landfall. In the event that Alabama is spared the full effect of a hurricane, then those commodities that Alabama does not need immediately can either be retained or transferred over to neighboring states that were impacted by that disaster and where the need is greater.

In conclusion, I believe the onus for establishing and maintaining effective emergency management programs is on state and local government. The federal government provides overall coordination and much needed funding. Each level of government depends on the others to coordinate an effective disaster response.

FEMA needs to be empowered to do its job. It needs a budget commensurate with its responsibilities for emergency preparedness and response. And regardless of where it is located in the federal structure, it needs to be led by a professional emergency manager, with the authority and resources to coordinate effective disaster response. You can assist us in a number of ways, including providing us with relevant training, to establish the base level of knowledge among emergency managers. You can assist us by increasing Emergency Management Performance Grant funding, and by relooking and reenergizing the Hurricane Preparedness and Earthquake Preparedness Programs. You can assist us by building FEMA’s logistics capacity. And lastly you can assist us by directing the Department of Energy to establish a program for addressing fuel shortfalls in disaster impacted areas.

The shortcomings of the disaster response that prompted this investigation did not occur after Katrina formed in the Gulf of Mexico. The shortcomings brought to light by this hurricane revealed issues of emergency preparedness that were years in the making. I only hope each organization impacted by Katrina learns from its experience, and is better prepared for the next storm. I am confident Alabama is committed, not only to learning its lessons from past storms, but insuring that we do all that we can not to make the same mistake twice.

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the committee, I would like to thank you again for your time, and would welcome any questions you may have.
Statement for the Record

James M. Walker, Jr.
Director, Alabama Department of Homeland Security

House of Representatives Bipartisan Select Committee
On Hurricane Katrina

November 9, 2005
Statement for the Record

James M. Walker, Jr.
Director, Alabama Department of Homeland Security

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to address Alabama’s preparation and response to Hurricane Katrina.

As Director of the Alabama Department of Homeland Security, one of my responsibilities is to administer the State Homeland Security Grant Program (SHSGP) appropriated by Congress and managed through the Federal Department of Homeland Security’s Office for Domestic Preparedness. Let me assure you Alabama is taking every necessary step to ensure the grant funds you provide are being managed responsibly and with complete accountability and transparency.

The relevance of my testimony as it relates to Alabama’s preparation and response to Hurricane Katrina is to describe how Alabama has applied homeland security grants to build capabilities instrumental to preparedness, prevention, protection, response, and recovery operations. The capabilities we’ve built in Alabama serve our citizens whether the incident or disaster is natural or man-made.

The Alabama Department of Homeland Security was created by an act of the Alabama Legislature and signed into law by Governor Bob Riley on June 18, 2003; just three months after Federal DHS became operational on March 1, 2003. Since that time the Alabama Department of Homeland
Security has administered three fiscal years worth of State Homeland Security Grant Program dollars totaling almost $100 million ($34.5 million in FY03, $36.8 million in FY04, and $28.1 million in FY05).

First, I would like to express my gratitude to the Congress, President Bush, and the Federal Department of Homeland Security for the homeland security grants we’ve received in Alabama. It is my belief that the receipt and responsible distribution of these grant funds in Alabama has saved the lives of many of our citizens. Thank you for making these grants available.

As Governor Riley’s Homeland Security Director my focus is on preventing acts of terrorism and protecting infrastructure and people. However, given the complexity of prevention and protection, it is safe to believe we cannot prevent against every opportunity made available to those who would wish Alabama and her citizen’s harm. Therefore, we must also maintain a robust response and recovery capability should an incident occur. The Alabama Emergency Management Agency (AEMA) is the response and recovery agency for the State of Alabama. During a natural disaster the AEMA functions as an independent agency. However, if a man-made or terrorist incident occurs, the AEMA becomes task organized under the Alabama Department of Homeland Security.

During our initial assessments of Alabama’s sixty-seven counties and federally recognized Indian tribe we determined there were clear and distinct inequities in public safety capabilities available to serve our citizens. There were no common standards throughout the state. There were counties with capabilities and counties without capabilities. I believe that if the Congress
were to look at all of our states and territories it would find that inequities exist among them.

When Governor Riley took office in January 2003 Alabama was clearly a state with limited homeland security capabilities. Make no mistake, public safety officials at every level of government in Alabama are fully committed to protecting and serving citizens. What they needed were the resources to build the capabilities necessary to cope with the inherent dangers of the 21st Century. I believe in the past two and a half years we’ve made great strides toward improving our capabilities throughout the state.

With the help of the Congress and federal homeland security grants, Alabama has built 54 standardized response and recovery teams across the state (9 light rescue, 10 medium rescue, 9 heavy rescue, 8 hazardous material, 6 water rescue, 2 disaster mortuary, 1 urban search and rescue, 1 incident support, and 8 law enforcement mutual aid). Several of these teams were mobilized and deployed to assist with Hurricane Katrina. When the requirement to assist in Alabama was no longer necessary, several of these teams deployed to assist our neighbors in Mississippi and Louisiana.

With the help of the Congress and federal homeland security grants, Alabama has invested over $17 million toward improving interoperable communications capabilities statewide. Our public safety officials can now better communicate with each other over different and disparate radio systems at the county and state level. Plus, we’ve purchased regional communications assets deployable on short notice to provide surge capability when and where it is needed.
With the help of the Congress and federal homeland security grants, Alabama has invested over $5 million to improve information sharing between criminal justice, law enforcement, and public safety activities.

With the help of the Congress and federal homeland security grants, Alabama has built law enforcement prevention and response equipment packages located strategically around the state. Specialized police equipment not available to every law enforcement agency in the past is now available to all law enforcement agencies on an “as needed” basis.

With the help of Congress and federal homeland security grants, Alabama has conducted over 50 state and local exercises and training events to test our ability to communicate, coordinate, and work through the friction associated with any crisis, natural or man-made. I learned during my Army career that units and activities that work and train together cannot help but become better as a result.

With the help of the Congress and federal homeland security grants, Alabama has made targeted homeland security investments in each of our 67 counties and with the Poarch Band of the Creek Indians, Alabama’s only federally recognized Indian tribe. Stakeholder committees have been formed in every county among all public safety disciplines and tough decisions are made by local leaders to build local capabilities. Including all of our public safety activities and citizen support groups into the homeland security debate has accomplished more, in my view, than almost anything else we’ve done.
With the help of the Congress and federal homeland security grants, state agencies have more capability, better equipment, and a better operational framework. The Alabama Department of Homeland Security is funded almost exclusively with federal homeland security grant dollars. Our State Emergency Operations Center now has state of the art equipment and capabilities. Our State Trooper fleet now has desperately needed communications equipment upgrades.

None of these investments in public safety would have been possible without the homeland security grants and other federal grants we’ve received in Alabama. The capabilities we’ve built using homeland security grants helped Alabama cope with Hurricane Katrina. They will also help Alabama cope with man-made or natural disasters for the foreseeable future. There is little doubt the work we’ve already done will position Alabama to address the capabilities-based planning requirements included in the soon to be released National Preparedness Goal. As you know, this goal places a high-priority on states and localities obtaining proficiencies in 36 capabilities that allow public safety officials to effectively respond to both natural and man-made disasters.

My experience has taught me that in any situation or disaster there is no substitute for effective leadership. Organizations can have the best equipment and training in the world, but without effective leadership chaos is too often the result. I believe President Bush has shown effective leadership creating the Federal Department of Homeland Security. When agencies in the federal architecture join forces and work together it creates a better framework for states. I believe Secretary Chertoff has shown
effective leadership attempting to task organize the Federal Department of Homeland Security into a more effective model. I am optimistic the final reorganization of Federal DHS will also benefit state operations.

I believe Governor Riley has shown effective leadership by properly executing his responsibilities and authority preparing Alabama for Hurricane Katrina. It is a difficult decision to evacuate citizens in coastal communities when hotels and parks are full of vacationers. Yet Governor Riley’s decision to evacuate saved lives. It is a difficult decision to reverse lanes on a busy interstate. Yet Governor Riley’s decision to reverse the traffic flow on I-65 led to a smoother evacuation and saved lives. Mobilizing the National Guard and prepositioning response teams and utility workers and hunkering them down in the path of a hurricane is a hard decision. Yet, Governor Riley’s decision to preposition assets and capabilities helped Alabama keep law and order and restore a sense of normalcy after Hurricane Katrina passed through.

The combination of increased capabilities and effective leadership were the driving forces behind Alabama’s preparedness and response to Hurricane Katrina. In the weeks to come, Alabama will continue its recovery and provide stability to the influx of evacuees from other states. As in the past, Alabama will learn valuable lessons from Hurricane Katrina and take the appropriate actions necessary to better protect our people and property when the next disaster strikes.
I thank you again for the privilege of appearing before you, and I thank you for the homeland security assistance the Congress has provided to the State of Alabama.

End of Statement
Baldwin County is one of only two coastal counties in the State of Alabama. Since 1995, we have experienced eight hurricanes resulting in seven Presidential Disaster Declarations. The county, with over 1600 square miles of land area includes 35 miles of coastline along the Gulf of Mexico and over 30 miles of coastline along Mobile Bay. Our County has a population over 140,000 and is visited by 4 million tourists annually which creates a revenue of over 2 billion dollars. For this reason, our County Commissioners and Municipal leaders have invested their time and money in Hurricane Planning and Preparedness efforts. Today, I would like tell you how we plan, prepare and respond in Baldwin County, Alabama.

**Preparation:**

Baldwin County has developed an Emergency Operations Plan specific to our hazard vulnerabilities. The plan specifically addresses the procedures to follow during an actual emergency event. Each part of the EOP provides guidance and outlines duties,
responsibilities and procedures to be performed during emergency activation. It includes evacuation zones and routes, commodities distribution procedures and response coordination. Annual exercises are performed to test all aspects of our plan. Each year, a special Hurricane training day is held for all first responders and elected officials to review the hurricane annex of the EOP. Further, key municipal and county staff annually attends the National Hurricane conference as well as the State of Alabama Hurricane Conference for additional training. Baldwin County has an active Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) which uses an “all hazards” approach to bring business and industry together to plan and prepare for natural hazards as well as hazardous chemicals.

**Katrina:**

Approximately five days prior to the landfall of Hurricane Katrina, consultation was initiated with the National Hurricane Center, State of Alabama Emergency Management Agency and the Mobile office of the National Weather Service to discuss the storm’s strike probabilities, intensity and forecast. Information was immediately disseminated to all local elected officials and first responders. The Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was made ready for the probability of activation.

Conference calls were held two to three times daily to track the storms forward movement and projected path. Baldwin County uses a FEMA indorsed software program called **Hurrevac** to assist emergency managers in the decision making process. This software program provides real time information on storm tracking, projection and guidance for evacuation decision making. Even though the projected path was to our West, we prepared for the potential effects of the storm including, high winds, intense rainfall and a 15 to 17 foot storm surge. Our training and experience has taught us to use
the projection as a guide, but to prepare for potential shift in direction, speed and intensity.

Baldwin County initiated a partial activation of the Emergency Operations Center for all key personnel on August 27, 2005. During this time, emergency readiness was assessed and decisions regarding evacuation, resources and shelters were made. Elected officials and first responders assembled at the EMA to participate in the conference calls with the National Hurricane Center and the National Weather Service. At this time, EMA distributed 800 MHz radio’s to all Municipal Mayors and County Commissioners to better communicate the needs of the community during and immediately following the storm. A county staff person was assigned to coordinate local officials’ needs. Additionally, the Hamm operator team was contacted to mobilize operations to further enhance communications. An ACU 1000 communications vehicle was obtained through the State EMA to enhance communications capabilities.

The information gathered during the conference calls prompted a voluntary evacuation of the coastal communities, flood prone areas and mobile home residents on August 27th.

A full activation requires representatives from the Alabama Department of Transportation, utility companies, private relief organizations, National Guard and municipal officials to man the County Emergency Operations Center. The County Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) was notified and placed on alert.

A full activation of the EOC was ordered at 6:00AM on August 28th with a Local State of Emergency declared by the Baldwin County Commission at 9:00AM that same morning. Coordinating with these representatives at the EOC, the Emergency Management staff outlined the potential vulnerabilities for each community and initiated the opening of five
county shelters and two special needs shelters. Due to the forecast track and risk potential, a decision was made to utilize the Reverse 911 call down system to alert all citizens in vulnerable areas. (This system has the capability to use GIS mapping to call all homes in the county or site specific areas to warn them of potential danger). Governor Bob Riley issued a mandatory evacuation on August 28th at 1:00PM in coordination with local officials to include; “all Plash Island, Fort Morgan Peninsula, all areas south of Fort Morgan Road in Gulf Shores; residents south of Perdido Beach Boulevard. and all residents living in Perdido Key, also, all low lying and flood prone areas south of I-10”.

**COMMODITIES DISTRIBUTION COORDINATION:**

The Baldwin County Emergency Management Agency communicated to citizens to plan and prepare to stay on their own for the first 72 hours. We explained that it may take at least 72 hours to have commodities delivered from the staging areas. This first 72 hours are also utilized by first responders for immediate lifesaving measures. The Emergency Management Agency supplied the EOC with food and supplies to self sustain for up to two weeks. Shelters were supplied with necessary food and materials on August 28th in order to sustain them for 72 hours as well. Our shelter management plan outlines for the American Red Cross to assume shelter management responsibility within 72 hours following the storm event. The Emergency Management Agency utilized the commodities and distribution plan from our EOP for the coordination of ice, water and meals ready to eat (MRE’s) for affected citizens. This plan provides for first responders and State National Guard assets to distribute the needed supplies. Coordination with the State Emergency Management Agency was done in advance of the storm for the staging of expected commodities. Needs are based on anticipated damage assessment, potential
power loss and residing population. The commodities were staged outside the affected
storm areas for immediate delivery following the storm.

**Communication:**

The Baldwin County Emergency Management Agency building is co-located with the
Emergency 911 facility and houses the Baldwin County Sheriff’s Dispatch office. This
provides for a 24 hour focal point for communication and coordination of assets. The
EMA office uses the following modes of communication to enhance response; Southern
Linc Radios (800 MHz), Cell phones, email, Nextel Radios, Hamm Radio Operators,
Satellite phones, EM 2000, local media outlets, mass fax capability, and the Reverse 911
System. Additionally, the EMA office uses Chamber of Commerce personnel who have
been trained under the FEMA PIO Course for public information distribution during a
 crisis. First responders, including Fire Departments, Municipal Police and County
Sheriff’s personnel coordinate directly with EMA and with the Sheriff’s dispatch.

**Response:**

Immediately following Hurricane Katrina, damage assessment teams comprised of the
Baldwin County Tax assessor’s office, Building Officials, Highway Department and
Sheriff’s personnel, were assembled. The information gathered during the assessment
was given to EMA staff for dissemination to Alabama Emergency Management Agency.
The assessment is done to determine if the disaster can be handled with local resources or
if State and Federal Assistance is needed. It was determined that the extent of Katrina
damage was beyond our capability to fully manage. State Emergency Management and
FEMA quickly assembled damage assessment teams to provide assistance in the areas of
Public and Individual assistance. Commodities staged in Montgomery were delivered to Baldwin County within the 72 hours as anticipated.

As per our EOP, EMA coordinated with first responders for the setup and distribution of commodities including ice, water and MRE’s to our affected population. The Red Cross assembled at the seven shelters to assist in consolidation and meeting the needs of the 1,022 Baldwin County Residents residing in the shelters. As the danger passed, many Baldwin County residents were able to return to their homes. It soon became apparent that long term shelters needed to be opened to assist evacuees from Mississippi and Louisiana. At this time, the State of Alabama Emergency Management Agency assisted with other supplies, cots, water, MRE’s, blankets, etc. to help in this effort. It was estimated that we had over 10,000 evacuees.

FUNDING:

Baldwin County received $52,558 from State and Federal assistance for our EMA program in FY 05. The County Commission’s FY 05 budget provided $336,848.00 to our agency. Due to Hurricane Katrina and the need to enhance our operation, the Baldwin County Commission’s FY 06 budget includes $622,221.00 in funding. In general, this funding is used to pay the salaries of four permanent employees and the overall operation of the 5000sq.ft. EOC. The Baldwin County EMA acts as a coordinating agency for state and federal grant programs assisting in the purchase of equipment needs for local first responders. Over the past several years, all money received from grants has been for the sole purpose of providing terrorist prevention equipment. No money has been made available to promote Hurricane program management from the State and Federal level.
Homeland Security Mandates a core committee comprised of Municipal and County representation approve all expenditures made with Homeland Security Grant funding. To date, all funds have been spent for prevention and detection equipment and the development of a countywide hazardous materials trailer.

**Needs:**

A Hurricane Evacuation Study was completed for Baldwin and Mobile Counties in 2000. This study considered population data from the 1990 census which grossly underestimated the actual permanent and tourist population of Baldwin County. Due to Baldwin’s rapid population growth, a new study needs to be done taking into consideration tri-state evacuations (Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama) including transportation modeling, population increases and current shelter capabilities. Additionally, more work needs to be done to develop an enhanced public awareness program for hurricanes. Storm Surge specifically needs to be addressed and the population educated. Finally, FEMA needs to be removed from under the Department of Homeland Security and given back its own identity. Natural Hazard’s planning needs to be brought back to the local level with adequate funding.

In closing, I would like to thank you Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of this Committee for providing me this opportunity to represent Baldwin County, Alabama. I appreciate your efforts to enhance Federal, State and Local Emergency Management Agencies as we respond these catastrophic events.
MICHAEL BOLCH

Federal Coordinating Officer,
Alabama Hurricane Katrina Recovery

TESTIMONY

BEFORE THE

HOUSE Select Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina

ON

THE STATE OF ALABAMA’S PREPARATION FOR AND RESPONSE TO HURRICANE KATRINA

NOVEMBER 9, 2005

Good morning Chairman Davis and members of the Committee. I am Michael Bolch, Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Thank you for inviting me to testify and speak about my experiences in Alabama leading up to and following Hurricane Katrina. I have been an FCO for FEMA since May of 2000. Prior to that, I had two decades of experience in emergency management working at commercial power plants and with the Department of Energy.
Since becoming an FCO, I have overseen 22 major disasters. The FCO establishes and sets up a local disaster field office, oversees the team of disaster workers who assemble and work out of that office, and serves as the Disaster Recovery Manager. Additionally, the FCO represents the President at a disaster site, meeting with high-level elected officials, including the Governor, Members of Congress, Mayors, and other local officials, as well as the media, to provide up-to-date information. At its peak, I managed a staff of 577 federal disaster workers in the Alabama field office.

In preparation for major hurricanes such as Katrina, FEMA works in close partnership with the State Office of Emergency Management. State and local officials carry out the bulk of the work, providing preparedness information and making preparations for sheltering. FEMA can support state and local governments in these efforts by bringing to the table basic commodities such as water, food and ice when the State is unable to do so. Distribution of such commodities to disaster victims post event is accomplished at the State’s direction. Whenever possible, including prior to Hurricane Katrina, key FEMA representatives also co-locate with State operations at the Emergency Operations Center prior to the storm to ensure coordination of planning and preparedness efforts and to speed response operations in the aftermath of a storm. State and
local operations are further supported by resources at the Regional Office and the National Response Coordination Center at FEMA Headquarters both of which are activated in anticipation of a large scale hurricane to monitor needs and coordinate the response.

After the storm, the State gathers information from its network of local emergency managers and officials regarding damage and critical needs. The State assesses the level of damage, prioritizes critical needs, deploys its own assets accordingly and if needed, requests additional federal support through FEMA.

My personal experience preparing for and responding to Hurricane Katrina in Alabama demonstrated first hand to me the strong working relationship that exists between FEMA and the State of Alabama. Overall, the response to Hurricane Katrina in Alabama was well organized and sufficiently managed. Within the first few days after the disaster was declared, FEMA provided more than 11.2 million pounds of ice (280 trucks), 836 thousand gallons of water (186 trucks), and more than a million meals-ready-to-eat (103 trucks) in response to the State’s requests. In addition we provided cots, blankets and other essential items to support sheltering efforts.
We must remember that Katrina has been the largest and most complex disaster this country has ever experienced. We need to keep in mind that—although you don’t hear much about it lately—FEMA and the State and local partners do a lot good in terms of helping victims put their lives back together. At its peak, more than 5,421 people were in shelters across the state. That number is now down to six. More than 112 thousand people applied for FEMA assistance and we have disbursed over $110 million in aid. In addition, we have placed 2,123 individuals and families in mobile homes or travel trailers and have 170 others located in other federal housing.

And, in another milestone, more than 90 percent of the massive debris removal effort in Alabama is complete. Our Public Assistance program, which helps local governments and eligible private non profits to fund debris removal as well as emergency costs and repairs to infrastructure, has processed 733 project worksheets—more than 73 percent of the applications, obligated more than $26 million, and continues to support the state in rebuilding those critical areas damaged by this massive storm.
Alabama not only has a Presidential Declaration for Hurricane Katrina, all 67 counties are included in the emergency disaster declaration for those states hosting evacuees from devastated areas of Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. More than 26 thousand households from those three states are registered with FEMA and living in Alabama. FEMA is supporting the State of Alabama in its continuing efforts to provide housing and services to this population as well.

Additionally, FEMA representatives are already in the field working with state and local officials to identify potential mitigation projects that will lessen damage from futures events.

I am proud of the work that we do at FEMA. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.