

Federal Coordinator Powell Outlines Progress Made, Priorities for Mississippi Rebuilding Post-Katrina - Testifies Before Senate Field Hearing in Gulfport

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Gulfport, Miss. – Federal Coordinator for Gulf Coast Rebuilding Donald E. Powell today outlined the progress made to date in Mississippi since Hurricane Katrina struck and also discussed his overall role as well as the challenges and opportunities the region faces in the intermediate and long-term recovery and rebuilding effort.

In remarks delivered at a Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs field hearing convened at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, Powell reiterated President Bush's commitment to do "whatever it takes" to support the recovery and rebuilding efforts of Mississippi and the entire Gulf Coast. "The state of Mississippi is of great historical, cultural, and economic importance to this country, and we will make sure her citizens get back on their feet and rebuild their lives. Whole communities throughout the Gulf Coast have been ravaged by Katrina and Rita, and I am confident that together we will see a better tomorrow for our fellow Americans in the affected areas," he testified.

Powell also stressed the role of the local leadership and community in the overall rebuilding effort while also ensuring that those plans for which Federal investments are made "are conducive to the prudent, effective and appropriate investment of taxpayer dollars. We understand the importance of being good stewards of the substantial amounts of money that have been, and will continue to be, spent on this effort."

"The President has made it abundantly clear that the vision and plans for rebuilding the Gulf Coast should come from the local and state leadership, not from Washington, D.C. This is not an exercise in centralized planning," he stated. "My job is to identify the priority of needs for long-term rebuilding by working with the people on the ground, communicating those realities to the decision makers in Washington, and advising the President and his leadership team on the most effective, integrated, and fiscally responsible strategies for a full and vibrant recovery. I will then provide thoughtful and coordinated federal support to the affected areas."

Powell applauded Governor Barbour's leadership and his Commission, lead by Jim Barksdale, saying he admired their "strong and unified vision," as well as their focus and speed in finishing their plan for rebuilding released last week.

Powell discussed two key "critical path" issues that he is working to resolve in order to move into the next stage of rebuilding in Mississippi: debris removal and housing. Powell pointed out the scope of the debris problem by noting that in just the 3 Mississippi counties of Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson, Katrina left more debris than 1992's Hurricane Andrew and the World Trade Center attack – combined. He noted the progress made to date on debris removal with some two-thirds of total debris already removed. "There is still a great deal of work to be done, but Mississippi is on the right track with the goal of completion sometime this spring."

On housing, Powell noted that the progress made with less than 2,000 households remaining in Mississippi hotel and motel rooms. FEMA is providing more than 31,000 travel trailers to hurricane victims that are residing in the state -- nearly 11,000 of these families in Harrison County, 8,000 in Jackson County, nearly 8,000 in Hancock County and more than 2,500 in Forrest County. Of the 450,000 Mississippi residents who received disaster assistance following Hurricane Katrina, 280,000 were approved for direct or transitional housing assistance totaling \$745 million. Another \$300 million went to some 115,000 Mississippians for assistance for other needs to help with unemployment, relocation services, reuniting victims with their families and other aid programs. Finally, more than 100,000 Mississippians received rental assistance, totaling approximately \$230 million, which is going to pay for rent at apartments across the region.

Powell then outlined the transition from immediate recovery to long-term rebuilding, which is focused on three key objectives; restoring long-term safety and security; renewing the region's economy and creating growth opportunities; and revitalizing communities. To that end, he noted the \$10 million allocated for a comprehensive study of hurricane and storm protection and \$620 million for flood and storm protection projects across Louisiana and Mississippi; the passage of the Gulf Opportunity Zones Act (or GO Zones) legislation which encourages businesses to create new jobs and restore old ones; the \$1 billion the Small Business Administration has approved for 14,000 home and business disaster loans; the \$100 million in aid Mississippi has thus far received to get its educational system up and running again since the storm hit; and the \$740 million for road, port, train, public transit and bridge repair.

Looking specifically at community development, Powell pointed to \$11.5 billion in Community Development Block

Grants (CDBG) and the \$390 million in housing vouchers for the Gulf Coast in the recently-passed \$29 billion reallocation legislation. Mississippi plans to use the bulk of its share of the \$11.5 billion to compensate affected under- or uninsured homeowners who resided outside of the floodplain. "Aside from the housing aid and other public assistance, nearly 400,000 completed inspections in Mississippi and 48,000 roofs have been temporarily covered by FEMA's "Blue Roof" program operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. FEMA has provided over \$1 billion directly to Hurricane Katrina victims in Mississippi through the Individuals and Households Program. In addition, 13,800 Mississippians have received \$1.8 billion in National Flood Insurance Program claims. These families are and will continue to fill the streets, schools and places of worship and will be a critical component to the revitalization of this great state."

Powell concluded by pointing to the region's history of overcoming adversity caused by Mother Nature. "Every time some type of natural disaster has hit, the people of this region have come back, and come back stronger than before. Failure is not an option. Once again, working together, we can return the Gulf Coast to its rightful place in the American landscape. While the hurricanes cause much tragedy, I believe, as my father used to say, good things can come from the bad. It's too important a task not to do it right."