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LIEBERMAN, COLLINS REVIEW FEMA STATUS UPDATE **Agency Has Made Moderate Improvements; Not Yet Ready for A Catastrophe**

WASHINGTON – Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Chairman Joe Lieberman, ID-Conn., and Ranking Member Susan Collins, R-Me., Thursday noted progress made by the Federal Emergency Management Administration in transforming itself into a disaster agency that can respond effectively to a catastrophe but noted that it has a long way to go before it reaches that goal.

At a hearing entitled “The New FEMA: Is the Agency Better Prepared for a Catastrophe Now Than It Was in 2005?”, Department of Homeland Security Inspector General Richard Skinner released a report indicating the agency has made modest to moderate progress in eight of the nine categories of needed reform that the IG’s office looked at. While the IG noted that FEMA has never been prepared to cope with a catastrophe the scope of Hurricane Katrina, the agency generally received praise for its effectiveness in responding to “normal” disasters such as recent California wildfires and flooding in the Midwest.

“While this progress has been made, there is much more that still remains to be done before FEMA, and our country, are prepared for the next catastrophe,” Lieberman said. “One thing this report makes clear is that Congress must continue to invest in FEMA if the agency is to realize its full potential...An important point running throughout this DHS IG report is that additional substantial funding increases for FEMA are still necessary. In almost every category reviewed – Planning, Coordination and Support, Interoperable Communications, Logistics, Evacuations, Housing, Disaster Workforce, Mission Assignments and Acquisition Management – one of the reasons continually cited for lack of more substantial progress was a shortage of staff, financial resources or both.”

Collins said: “The IG found that FEMA has made progress in all of the areas reviewed, but that in some areas, the progress has been limited or modest. I don’t believe we should underestimate how difficult it is to completely revamp procedures, processes, and people while continuing to cope with many natural disasters. I know that FEMA has improved and is working hard on its deficiencies. Last year, I saw first-hand the agency’s effective response to the Patriots’ Day storm in Maine, and I observed a training exercise in Rhode Island and Massachusetts that was impressive in its coordination and scope. The regional approach that the Chairman and I advocated is clearly producing results. Nevertheless, effective implementation of our comprehensive reforms is essential if FEMA is to learn the lessons of Katrina and to prepare for even worse disasters, such as a biological, chemical, or even a nuclear attack.”

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the failure at all levels of government to respond adequately, Lieberman and Collins spent seven months investigating what went wrong. The legislative result of their investigation was the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act which passed Congress and was signed into law in 2006. Since then, the Committee has been conducting close oversight of FEMA’s progress in implementing those reforms.

The IG’s report represents the Department’s first formal analysis of FEMA’s progress. It found that the agency had made “moderate” progress in improving its planning, coordination and support, interoperable communications, logistics, and acquisition management. The agency has made “modest” progress in drafting evacuation plans, strengthening its workforce, and planning for emergency housing. The report found that FEMA had made little or no progress in managing its mission assignments to other government agencies.

It also found that budget shortfalls, reorganizations, inadequate information technology systems, and confusing or limited authorities negatively affected FEMA's progress. The report recommends that FEMA conduct an analysis of its needs in terms of preparing for a catastrophic disaster and that it develop a system to track its progress within each preparedness area, providing regular updates on progress made.

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