

**Mississippi Field Hearing
Senator Joe Lieberman
January 17, 2006
As Prepared for Delivery**

Thank you, Madam Chairman for conducting this hearing here in Mississippi where damage from Hurricane Katrina has forever altered the landscape of the Gulf Coast and the lives of its residents. Your Washington representatives - Senators Lott and Cochran, and Congressmen Taylor, Pickering, Thompson, and Wicker have been effective advocates on your behalf. I also want to welcome our distinguished colleague, Senator Landrieu, from Louisiana, who has championed the cause of her state and by extension all victims of this horrific storm. I look forward to visiting New Orleans later today to see first hand the persisting challenges that are impeding full recovery for Louisiana.

I know that, with all of the national media attention on the plight of residents in New Orleans during the storm, there was a justified feeling in other hard hit communities in Mississippi that you were being forgotten. We have not forgotten you. We are all too aware of the wreckage that has occurred in Mississippi and we are committed to working with officials and residents across the Gulf Coast to help you recover from one of the most destructive natural disasters in our nation's history.

Thanks to all of our witnesses - Mayors Eddie Favre of Bay St. Louis and Brent Warr of Gulfport, who have weathered the killer storm and now must lead their

communities through the hard, painful work of recovery. I look forward to hearing your perspectives on recovery for the region.

I am also pleased that we are joined by Dr. Gavin Smith, who has just been named by Governor Barbour as Director of Mississippi's Office of Recovery and Renewal. You will be working with officials in the region to implement recommendations of the Governor's Recovery, Rebuilding and Renewal Commission – a tall task if there ever was one - and I look forward to hearing from you and working with you in the days, months, and perhaps years ahead.

Finally, I also want to thank Donald Powell, recently appointed by President Bush as Coordinator of Federal Support for the Recovery and Rebuilding of the Gulf Coast Region. I had the opportunity to chat with Mr. Powell recently in my office. I am impressed with your commitment to ensuring that the promises that have been made to help the people of this region recover and rebuild are fulfilled. I look forward to a productive working relationship. Thank you all for being here.

The effects of Hurricane Katrina - which slammed into the Mississippi Gulf Coast with sustained winds of 125 mph and storm surge as high as 30 feet - will be with us for years, perhaps decades. The hurricane cut short the lives of 230 people in Mississippi – more than 1,300 across the region - and over a million people have been displaced, creating the largest humanitarian crisis in the United States since the Great Depression.

Federal disaster declarations covered 90-thousand square miles. Damage estimates range from \$75 billion to \$120 billion. The challenges ahead would be daunting under any circumstances but they are that much more overwhelming in Mississippi where 42 percent of all working families are low-income - the highest rate in the nation - and over 1/3 of the jobs here pay below-poverty wages. Nevertheless, I am hopeful that together – regardless of race, class, political affiliation, or allegiance to the private or public sector, local, state or federal government - we can get the state on the road to recovery.

Governor Barbour took an important step by establishing the Recovery, Rebuilding and Renewal Commission. Just last week, the Commission issued its final report with some 200 recommendations for recovery of critical infrastructure, water and sewer systems, affordable housing, schools, and land use. It should be a useful guide, but we understand the tremendous challenges facing communities and residents across the gulf coast.

I'm told the local tax base of some communities has been hit hard as revenue from casinos, sales taxes, and property taxes have sharply declined and likely will decline even further next year. Without sufficient revenue, communities cannot provide and maintain essential services, much less undertake the huge task of recovery.

Furthermore, many area residents simply cannot afford to rebuild. FEMA has issued advisory guidance for rebuilding, and I know there is grave concern that, without

financial assistance, some residents will simply not be able to rebuild up to the new standards.

Those who didn't have flood insurance are doubly victimized. From what I understand, the Governor has proposed an unprecedented use of federal funds to help many home owners who didn't have flood insurance because they didn't live in flood plains. But many others won't qualify for this assistance and risk losing even more than they already have lost due to the storm.

Our Committee has been overseeing FEMA's work to better assist residents in this region, and quite frankly, some of FEMA's work during this admittedly unprecedented recovery effort has been far from adequate. For example, I'm told the quality control for some of the 30,000 trailers now in the region has been abysmal. We keep hearing stories about trailers making people sick because of still-drying glue, trailers where appliances don't fit, and even people still living in tents.

Debris removal is another sore point. Don Powell told me that Hurricane Katrina created more debris on the Mississippi Gulf Coast than was generated by Hurricane Andrew and the World Trade Center collapse combined. It took two years to remove debris from the World Trade Center. So it doesn't help that FEMA and the Corps of Engineers are apparently making debris removal overly complicated here on the Gulf Coast.

As I said, the challenges are daunting. Congress has provided billions of dollars in assistance. But we need to do more – and do it more effectively - to see that a new Gulf Coast emerges from this tragedy.

Some of what is needed is simply to continue to educate the American people, and especially members of Congress, about the full impact of the storm and the challenges that remain. I hope this hearing, as well as our work in Louisiana later today, will play a small part in that education process.

We need to get this business of rebuilding right. The response to Hurricane Katrina shook the public's confidence in the ability of government at all levels to protect its citizens in a crisis. We can begin to restore that confidence by working together toward a brighter future. I look forward to hearing from all of you about how to proceed on an effective course toward recovery, rebuilding, and renewal. Thank you.

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