

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
GOVERNOR HALEY BARBOUR, STATE OF MISSISSIPPI
BEFORE THE HOUSE SELECT BIPARTISAN COMMITTEE TO
INVESTIGATE THE PREPARATION AND RESPONSE TO
HURRICANE KATRINA

December 7, 2005

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to join you today to discuss the worst natural disaster in our nation's history, Hurricane Katrina.

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck our state a grievous blow. Although the eye of the storm landed at the Mississippi-Louisiana line, that eye was more than thirty miles wide, and Katrina completely devastated our entire coastline, from Pearlinton to Pascagoula. The miles upon miles of utter destruction is unimaginable, except to those who have witnessed it with their own eyes, on the ground. But this hurricane wasn't just a calamity for the Mississippi Gulf Coast; its impact extended far inland with hurricane force more than 200 miles from the Coast.

In her wake, Katrina left literally tens of thousands of uninhabitable, often obliterated homes; thousands of small businesses in shambles; dozens of schools and public buildings ruined and unusable; highways, ports and railroads, water and sewer systems, all destroyed.

On behalf of the people of Mississippi, I thank our sister states for all their assistance. The State of Florida's elite search and rescue team was on the

ground the first night, joining our local and state people, saving lives. For weeks, there were 600 Florida law enforcement officers, helping protect lives and property on the Coast, and providing indispensable support for local law enforcement. I told Governor Jeb Bush that when his service ends in Florida, he can move to Mississippi and they will elect him King of the Coast.

Essential help provided by other states is a testament to the effectiveness of the Emergency Management Assistance Compact among the states. North Carolina's Med-One portable hospital; Georgia's investigators and Ohio's search and rescue teams; 1200 National Guard from units of nearly 20 states had boots on the ground. Alabama sent two MP units while Mobile was still flooded. As Governor, I'm personally moved by it all.

The outpouring of support and generosity from the American people has been overwhelming. The private sector, corporate America, philanthropists and everyday people have done so much. A few weeks after the storm, the President and I toured a faith-based feeding station where hundreds of displaced people were eating a hot meal. I met a fellow from Vermont, a truck driver. He and 16 other truck drivers had driven down from Vermont to deliver 17 trailers of food to Gulfport. I couldn't believe it . . . 17 tractor-trailers all the way from Vermont. Then, he told me it was his third trip. The church and faith based groups have been terrific, really the backbone of on-going relief efforts. They are still there, helping our people.

We also appreciate the efforts of the federal government. People complain about failures; let me tell you about federal efforts that didn't go wrong. The night Katrina struck, Coast Guard helicopter crews from Mobile conducted

search and rescue operations on the Coast. These fearless young men, who hung from helicopters on ropes, dangling through the air in the dark that first night, pulled people off of roofs and out of trees. By the first Friday these Coast Guard daredevils had lifted 1700 Mississippians to safety by hoisting them into helicopters. Later that week, the U.S. Department of Transportation began providing fuel for all our emergency responders and critical operations, which was essential in our recovery efforts.

During the relief and recovery stages the federal government has pumped resources in to help us. These efforts have been enormous, but those efforts haven't been perfect, far from it. From the outset there were problems and shortages. Some were the inevitable result of our state's bearing the brunt of the largest and worst natural disaster in American history, which obliterated all systems: electricity, water, sewer, roads, bridges, communications.

We found ourselves having to scramble, adjust, innovate, make do. Our efforts weren't perfect either, not by any means. But the spirit of our people pulled us through. Our people are strong, resilient, self-reliant. They're not whiners; they're not into victim hood. From day one they hitched up their britches and did what had to be done: they helped themselves and helped their neighbors. Their spirit has been an inspiration to me, and it was and is the key to relief, recovery, rebuilding and renewal.

But here, more than 100 days after Katrina made landfall, our people face a problem they can't overcome or do anything to help themselves. Today the most important response needed by our people is for Congress to act to provide the necessary funding so we can rebuild our infrastructure which is critical to our renewal.

I am not diminishing the importance of the ongoing recovery efforts. More than 21 million cubic yards of debris have been removed, but that much or more remains. We are installing temporary housing at a record pace, but it is not nearly fast enough. More than 24,000 temporary housing units are occupied by some 65,000 Mississippians, but we need 10,000 more units. We continue to work on these issues every day and we continue to face problems with regard to pace, reimbursement, unnecessary distractions, arbitrary rules and so on.

But for us to continue moving forward, Congress must act. As the *Hattiesburg American* newspaper asked December 1st, “Where is the Money for Highways?” The answer to that is, “It is stalled in Congress.” The result is that our state Department of Transportation has had to stop rebuilding roads and bridges, so the reopening of our transportation network is delayed. If people can’t get to work or if they can’t get to your store, the private sector can’t rebuild the communities.

All of our school districts have reopened, but they are approaching bankruptcy. Congress has yet to act on legislation to provide financial assistance to these school districts, which are overwhelmed by restoration costs at a time when local revenues, which account for nearly 40% of their budgets, are unavailable.

More than 30,000 owners of destroyed homes are wondering how they can pay their mortgages on a concrete slab. These people had homeowners insurance, but they did not have flood insurance since they were told by agents of the federal government, their insurance agents and mortgage lenders, that they did not need flood insurance since they lived outside of the

flood plain. These homeowners relied to their detriment on the federal government's delineation of the 100 year flood plain. Congress has yet to act on a proposal to help these people in exchange for requiring them to build to higher construction standards and carry flood insurance. More than half the homes destroyed by Katrina's awesome and unprecedented storm surge were located outside the flood zone.

Since Congress has not acted, businesses, which might create jobs and opportunities for our people, are making decisions about where to locate or how to rebuild without knowing if their cost of capital or operations will be affected by tax legislation pending in Congress.

Local governments and the state government must make decisions about how to balance new needs with reduced revenue. Our state has arranged to borrow \$600 million to get by for a while; however, long term budget decisions are shrouded in uncertainty until we know if and where the federal government will respond.

We are at a point where our recovery and renewal efforts are stalled because of inaction in Washington, D.C., and the delay has created uncertainty that is having very negative effects on our recovery and rebuilding. It is taking the starch out of people who've worked so hard to help themselves and their neighbors.

I am glad to be here to discuss the days preceding Katrina and the aftermath; it is a worthwhile and important discussion. In that aftermath, Mississippi's citizens have been picking up and moving forward to rebuild Mississippi bigger and better than ever. But we must have assistance from the federal

government to rebuild our infrastructure and make our citizens able to help themselves. That important federal responsibility in the response to Katrina is needed terribly, and it is needed now.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I will be happy to answer any questions.