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Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina, December 7, 2005*

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of this Committee:

I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to be here today with Governor Barbour, local emergency management officials and officials from other state agencies to testify before you regarding Mississippi's preparedness for and response to Hurricane Katrina which made landfall on the Mississippi Gulf Coast at approximately 9 a.m. on Aug. 29, 2005. On Aug. 19, 1969 Hurricane Camille also made landfall on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and until Katrina, was the most costly and devastating disaster in our state's history. As you know, Hurricane Katrina will go down in history as the most devastating natural disaster in our nation's history and will replace Camille as the benchmark for hurricanes. As our state recovered from Camille, we will rebuild and recover from Katrina, but this time bigger and better than before.

Disasters are no stranger to Mississippi. Since becoming the Director of MEMA in February 2000, I have coordinated and overseen the response and recovery for 44 incidents requiring a Governor's State of Emergency. Eleven of these incidents resulted in a Presidential Disaster Declaration and an additional 18 departmental declarations from the Small Business Administration. Each one of these events required the activation of our state's Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan. Based on the lessons learned during each one of these events, we made adjustments in this plan using lessons learned. Hurricane Katrina was bigger than anything we have ever seen but we executed the plans we had in place at the local and state level and even today are adjusting these plans based on the lessons we are still learning from our preparedness for and response to Hurricane Katrina.

First let me say that our state's efforts to prepare for Hurricane Katrina and the successes of our efforts are the direct result of the leadership of our Governor. Governor Barbour's presence and personal involvement days before landfall and everyday since has been the factor that has contributed most to our success. The teamwork of the various state and federal agencies and local governments, working within the Unified Command System which was established very early, has been a critical part of our success in planning for and coordinating pre-landfall activities, organizing a comprehensive and massive response, and

managing the most extensive recovery effort in our history. Without this joint effort we could not have expected or realized the successes of our efforts. Even though most things went well, there were some problems. During this testimony I hope to highlight our successes, as well as the areas at every level of government that can be improved.

**Planning for Catastrophic Natural Events.** The preparedness phase for any event, which includes planning, training and exercises, especially for a catastrophic event such as Katrina, is critical to the outcome of any response to such an event, especially at the local and state level. Exercises, such as Hurricane Pam in 2004, which our state participated in, are designed and conducted in a cosmetic environment that many times does not reflect circumstances and operational conditions that actually stress our entire system. They do however enable us to test our operational capability, identify major shortfalls in coordination, and test our ability to work within a unified command system. Unfortunately the real test of our entire response system is during an actual event and the key to effective planning is what we do with the weaknesses identified either through exercises or actual events. It is the following point of lessons learned that I would like to expand on:

**1. Evacuation.** First, even though ultimately evacuation decisions in our state rest with the local governing authority, the state is included in the discussions leading to that decision. This participation proves to be critical once the evacuation begins because of coordination with adjacent states, increased traffic flow and evacuee shelter requirements that affect the entire state. During the last five years, MEMA, the Mississippi Department of Public Safety, the Mississippi National Guard and the Mississippi Department of Transportation worked with our counterparts in the State of Louisiana to develop a comprehensive evacuation plan that included contra-flow, or reverse-laning of Interstates 55 and 59 from New Orleans into Mississippi. During the 2004 hurricane season, culminating with Hurricane Ivan on Sept. 13, 2004, the contra-flow plan was never executed, but major traffic congestion in and around Hattiesburg, Mississippi resulted in a comprehensive review of our evacuation plan. Hattiesburg is known as the "hub city" because the city serves as the point at which major evacuation routes out of Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi's own Gulf Coast converge. As a result of these problems, Governor Barbour asked Mississippi Public Safety Commissioner George Phillips to develop a plan that would provide additional law enforcement officers to support evacuations, especially in the Hattiesburg area. This plan was completed prior to this year's hurricane season and executed flawlessly for the evacuation, including execution of contra-flowing both Interstates 55 and 59 from Louisiana into Mississippi. As part of our pre-landfall plan we dispatched MEMA liaisons to our lower six counties along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the Forrest County Emergency Operations Center in Hattiesburg and the Louisiana Emergency Operations Center. All of these initiatives contributed to a successful execution of our evacuation plan for Hurricane Katrina.

**2. Identification of Commodity and Equipment Needs.** During the four hurricanes that impacted the State of Florida last year, under the National Emergency Management Association's Emergency Management Assistance Compact, MEMA deployed staff to assist Florida in their response efforts. After several weeks, these employees returned and were debriefed by me personally so that I could take the lessons learned and see what worked well and to apply them to our planning. I also had the opportunity several times to talk with Florida's Director of Emergency Management Craig Fugate and discuss the lessons learned from his

perspective. It is specifically these lessons learned regarding commodities and equipment that I would like to elaborate on.

- **Commodity Needs.** One of the most critical elements identified in the post-landfall response and recovery during hurricanes is the availability of and the ability to distribute food, water and ice quickly and efficiently. As a result of the lessons learned during the 2004 hurricane season, MEMA developed a comprehensive food, water and ice distribution plan. The plan includes identification of and designation of points of distribution sites in every county. It also tasks the Mississippi National Guard with the sole responsibility to distribute these commodities thereby avoiding any additional burden on local governments. This plan was executed during Hurricane Ivan and again during Hurricane Katrina. This part of our plan, though not without some shortfalls, worked very well. The failure during Katrina was the federal pipeline that could not and did not deliver the commodities in the quantities necessary to provide these life-sustaining supplies to the thousands of Mississippi citizens in the days after landfall. On Saturday, Aug. 27, two days before Katrina made landfall, our FEMA operations officer submitted to FEMA Region IV in Atlanta, a request for food, water and ice that represented, what he felt would be required. On Sunday, based on the size of the storm, he increased his request. During the days when these commodities were so critical, we consistently received only 10 to 20 percent of the food, water and ice that we requested. In fact it was not until Sept. 9, 12 days after landfall, that the supply of these valuable commodities met our daily demand.
- **Equipment Needs.** Another resource identified in previous hurricanes as critical lifesaving capabilities were search and rescue teams. Even though Mississippi does not have one of the national FEMA certified Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams, we had already identified the need to build a comprehensive light search and rescue capability. Pre-landfall we had identified 19 of these teams consisting of three to four firefighters with a fire truck that contains basic equipment that enables them to conduct door-to-door search and rescue missions. Some of these teams were mobilized and pre-deployed to the State EOC during Hurricane Ivan but were not deployed to the Gulf Coast because of the change in the track of the storm. However, we did activate, mobilize and deploy 19 of these teams prior to Hurricane Katrina. Ultimately a total of 21 teams were deployed and proved to be invaluable to local jurisdictions during the days and weeks following Katrina's landfall. Because of lessons learned during Ivan and Katrina, MEMA is working to expand this capability throughout our state that will enable us to be more self-sufficient.

**3. Communication.** Hurricane Katrina made landfall as a Category 4 hurricane, but continued and remained a hurricane 185 miles inland with hurricane force gusts to the Tennessee state line. The entire communication infrastructure of Mississippi's Gulf Coast was destroyed and systems in many other parts of our state were rendered inoperable while systems that were operational were overloaded. This lack of communication resulted in delayed processing of local requests. Mississippi state law established a Wireless Communication Commission that is charting a path that will result in interoperability for emergency services at every level of government in our state. While we have invested millions of dollars in communication inoperability, the issue after

Katrina was operability. The primary means of communication for MEMA and the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks is satellite, the only communication system that was operational during the days after landfall. Even though our coastal county EOCs had this satellite capability, the strong winds of Katrina shifted their antennas and resulted in failed communication. We are addressing this failure by investigating use of omni-directional antennas for these systems that would not be affected by wind. This type of antenna is utilized on all MEMA and MDWFP vehicles and allows constant communication. MEMA is working towards this capability of satellite communications with omni-directional antennas in all of our county emergency management offices. Portable satellite phones purchased during Katrina are now a part of the State Emergency Response Team deployment package and can be issued to local authorities as a redundant system in disasters.

**4. Coordination with County Emergency Plans and Capabilities.** The State of Mississippi has a very comprehensive emergency management law that outlines roles and responsibilities for implementation of the Governor's authorities during emergencies and disasters. This law makes MEMA responsible for the emergency management plan and tasks us with oversight of all emergency plans at the state and local level. Through this law we are able to ensure consistency and compliance with the state Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP) and the National Response Plan (NRP). The law also requires that this plan include an evacuation and shelter component, a disaster response and recovery component, use of the National Guard, communication and warning, training and exercises, and urban search and rescue. County emergency management offices are required to establish a communication capability at the local level to ensure adequate flow of information during times of emergency. Reporting of incidents by local emergency management offices is accomplished through and monitored by the 24-hour State Warning Point operated by MEMA at the State EOC. During Hurricane Katrina the State EOC was fully activated on Saturday, Aug. 27, and staffed at that level until Sept. 15 when we transitioned to the Joint Field Office. All operational and logistical requirements associated with the preparedness for, response to and recovery from Hurricane Katrina have been coordinated through this State EOC. This included entities such as FEMA, USACOE, DOD and other federal partners.

**5. Liaison with Private Relief Organizations.** A major component of our state response and recovery plan includes the integration of private and faith-based relief organizations. This is accomplished at the state level through an organization called Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters (VOAD). VOAD includes such organizations as the Red Cross, Salvation Army, Baptist Disaster Services and others. This organization and their member agencies are a major player in the State EOC. Once the EOC is activated, these organizations are alerted and report to the State EOC and work with the Mississippi Department of Human Services as part of Emergency Support Function 6 – Mass Care. All tasks and missions for mass care, that includes sheltering and feeding, are handled by this function as part of the overall emergency management plan. This coordination continues throughout the response and recovery phases until such time there is no longer a need for the mass care emergency support function.

**6. Federal Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness Funds:**

- ***Federal Homeland Security Funds.*** The Mississippi Office of Homeland Security, a component of the Mississippi Department of Public Safety, manages the homeland security grant program. Grants are provided to local governments in the form of a Cooperative Agreement, and reimbursement is based on documentation provided by the purchasing jurisdiction to the Office of Homeland Security. These funds have been used to purchase protective gear, communications equipment and search and rescue equipment for our first responders. However, policy should be changed that will allow states and local governments to use federal homeland security funds towards planning and responding to all-hazards events, not just terrorism related incidents. Federal policy for how states and local governments can spend has been too limited.
- ***Emergency Preparedness Funds.*** The only federal funds provided to states that can be utilized to fund natural hazard preparedness is the Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG). In fiscal year 2005, MEMA received approximately \$2.3 million from the EMPG. Of this amount, \$1.3 million was allocated to 79 of our 82 counties to support the county emergency management program. This grant has enabled MEMA to increase active county emergency management programs from 43 in 2000 to 79 in 2005. EMPG funds allocated to counties are based on a formula for both a population allocation and a full or part-time emergency management director component. Grants are awarded to the counties through a cooperative agreement that establishes priorities for the year, requires annual work plans, and quarterly reports listing accomplishments for that quarter. Reimbursements to each county are done quarterly, based on authorized expenditures, backed by invoices and verification such as cancelled checks or check numbers. The remaining \$1 million is used by MEMA to support the state emergency management agency and to provide oversight to county emergency management programs. EMPG funds require a 50/50 federal/non-federal match. The current funding for EMPG falls far short of the amount needed to fully build and sustain strong local and state capabilities. A recent National Emergency Management Association survey reveals a nationwide \$264 million shortfall in the EMPG.

***9. Federal Assistance.*** The coordination and cooperation of the various federal agencies has been good. FEMA has been there since three days before landfall and has done everything possible to support our state's response and recovery efforts. The Corps of Engineers and Seabees have provided valuable support to local governments in restoration of critical services and debris removal. The successes in our state can be directly attributed to early establishment of the unified command system, daily strategy and action planning meetings, and development and distribution of the daily Incident Action Plan.

***10. Execution of Emergency Response Plans for Hurricane Katrina.*** Our state is very proud of our preparedness for, response to and the ongoing recovery efforts associated with Hurricane Katrina. MEMA took its first action in preparation for Katrina on Tuesday, Aug. 23, when we published our first situation report. (These reports continued until MEMA and FEMA began publishing joint reports once the Joint Field Office was established on Sept. 15). On Thursday, Aug. 25, MEMA conducted an executive planning meeting in preparation for Katrina. On Friday Aug. 26, Governor Barbour signed both a State of Emergency and an Executive Order authorizing the use of National Guard assets. A briefing was also conducted for all state agencies

and FEMA liaisons arrived. On Saturday, Aug. 27, the State Emergency Operations Center was activated and unified command established. MEMA liaisons were deployed to the six coastal counties, National Guard liaison officers were deployed to the three coastal counties and a liaison was deployed to the Louisiana SEOC to coordinate evacuation. On Sunday, Aug. 28, the State Emergency Response Team was deployed forward to Camp Shelby, just 60 miles north of the Gulf Coast and National Guard emergency rescue assets were deployed to the three coastal counties. Additional National Guard troops were put on alert and a battalion was also mobilized to Camp Shelby in preparation for execution of the food, water and ice distribution missions. At approximately 9 a.m. on Monday, Aug. 29, Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Our plan worked, but the commodities to support the plan did not arrive in the quantities requested to support the needs of our citizens.

### **What Worked Well.**

**1. Pre-landfall planning.** The state's pre-landfall planning and post-landfall response worked well in spite of the breakdown of the federal pipeline. The joint MEMA/FEMA decision to contract for and purchase commodities from the private sector, even though it did not fulfill the daily burn rate, enabled us to better manage the shortages. Identification and pre-positioning of search and rescue assets resulted in hundreds of lives saved.

**2. Unified Command.** The pre-landfall establishment of a unified command system that included all federal, state and volunteer agencies ensured a coordinated effort within an incident action plan with common goals and objectives. This unified command remains in place and continues to serve the state and local governments well.

**3. Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC).** During the preparedness for and response to Hurricane Katrina, one of the biggest success stories has been the activation and utilization of EMAC. This compact allowed our state to activate, mobilize and receive assets and resources from all across this country. To date there have been 24,791 personnel from 48 states executing 892 EMAC missions with an estimated cost of more than \$193 million. EMAC continues to not only be a valuable resource in times of disaster, but necessary for states when local and state resources fall short of requirements for both short term response and long term recovery.

### **Needs Improvement.**

**1. Clarification of the Roles and Responsibilities of the Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) and Principle Federal Official (PFO).** There must be one federal official appointed by the President to coordinate the federal response and recovery effort in each state. This individual, typically the FCO, must be empowered and have the authority to obligate federal assets and funds in the response and recovery effort. Based on the lessons learned in Katrina, there should also be a federal contracting officer deployed with the FCO who has the authority to enter into contracts and purchase commodities and certain equipment to support the response and recovery effort. The role and responsibility of the FCO became unclear and even changed upon appointment of the PFO.

**2. Federal logistics system.** The federal logistics and supply system failed during Hurricane Katrina. Currently the Corps of Engineers, General Services Administration and FEMA all have certain responsibilities in procurement and delivery of commodities and equipment. At no time during Hurricane Katrina did the state have a clear understanding of this system and what was the status of our requests. There must be a system that links the entire logistics system from the local and state government's ability to request, to the federal government's ability to fill the request and all levels of government's ability to track this request.

**3. Temporary Housing.** We must find a way to provide more temporary housing faster in a catastrophic event like Katrina when all housing is destroyed. This means local purchases of travel trailers and mobile homes and contracting of local individuals and companies to deliver and install.

**4. Subject-Matter Experts.** FEMA must be staffed with adequate subject matter experts who can meet the needs of multiple national disasters to include catastrophic events simultaneously. A combination of career employees and the disaster assistance employee would be acceptable as long as the threshold of knowledge was at a satisfactory level.

**5. Debris Removal.** Hurricane Katrina resulted in numerous disaster specific changes in policy for debris removal. Historically debris removal is the single issue in a major disaster that creates the most problems and also opportunities for abuse. We must find some common ground and develop policies that remove the obstacles that prevent us from accomplishing debris removal goals and objectives without compromising the integrity of the program and provide acceptable levels of accountability.

**6. Contracting and Sub-Contracting.** During disasters such as Katrina, the economic recovery of the area is as important as repair and rebuilding. Many times this can be delayed when hundreds or even thousands of citizens are unemployed due to the devastation. It then becomes important to put these unemployed citizens back to work. During the recovery phase of Hurricane Katrina many of our Mississippi companies and their employees have seen out-of-state companies receive contracts and sub-contracts that they were capable and prepared to execute. Priority to in-state contractors and sub-contractors is critical to restoring the economy of the disaster area and state.

**7. National System to Track Missing Persons:** During Hurricane Katrina's landfall the State EOC's phone systems jammed due to thousands of phone calls of people trying locate family members and friends. In the days following Katrina, additional phone lines were added to handle the call volume. Volunteers staffed the phone lines and began a missing persons database system. The missing persons hotline took more than 10,000 calls from 35 different countries. There was no national system in place to identify people in shelters, missing people or people who have been located and are safe. This was a national problem because this was a multi-state event and disaster victims were displaced in many states.

**In closing, preparing for an event like Hurricane Katrina or any natural disaster, we should never feel that we are completely prepared. We can always do better. We should never forget that all disasters are local and that local and state government, with federal**

support, must lead the preparedness for, response to and recovery from any disaster. Ultimately the success of any plan is the ability of the local, state and federal agencies to work together towards common goals. It requires strong leadership and teamwork and there is no time for turf battles. I hope that this investigation will guide us towards closer coordination and cooperation resulting in a more effective and efficient preparedness and response capability.

Again I appreciate this opportunity to be here today and will be glad to answer any questions you may have.

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