

***Opening Statement - Chairman Henry Cuellar (D-TX), as prepared
Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness and Response
Committee on Homeland Security
“PKEMRA Implementation:
An Examination of FEMA’s Preparedness and Response Mission”
March 17, 2009, 10:00 a.m. --- 311 Cannon House Office Building***

Today’s hearing will examine the implementation of the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (PKEMRA)

The genesis of PKEMRA can be traced to what we collectively recall as one of the Nation’s most embarrassing episodes.

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina affected more than a half million people located within approximately 90,000 square miles spanning Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, ultimately resulted in over 1,500 deaths, and resulted in the largest natural disaster relief and recovery operation ever undertaken in the United States

Hurricane Katrina revealed colossal inadequacies at the Federal, State, and local government levels to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a large-scale incident.

In response, Congress passed PKEMRA to address the shortcomings identified with the government’s response to the storm.

Most notable, PKEMRA retained FEMA within the Department and tasked it to lead and support the Nation’s risk-based, comprehensive emergency management system of preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation.

In doing so, Congress reintegrated preparedness and response and recovery operations into one entity – FEMA. In particular, PKEMRA made FEMA a distinct agency within DHS and placed restrictions on the Secretary’s authority to reorganize it. PKEMRA directed the FEMA Administrator to respond directly to Secretary of Homeland Security; and, PKEMRA created a direct line between the FEMA Administrator and the President during times of emergency.

I understand that there are those who have called for FEMA’s removal from the Department and would like to act as if Congress never passed PKEMRA.

The fact of the matter is that enhancing the Nation’s capacity to respond to large-scale incidents should not be an “us-versus-them” battle.

We can choose ignore the great stride FEMA has made in their preparedness and response to the ice storms, fire, tornadoes, and floods since PKEMRA has been enacted.

We can choose to discount the reality that Congress – not once, but twice – decided to locate FEMA within the Department. We did it with PKEMRA and with the Homeland Security Act in 2002.

Some may choose to dig in their heels regarding FEMA’s location. I, however, will defer to the first responder community who has said that they need FEMA at DHS so that they can be full partners to

respond to the Nation's emergencies. These groups are:

- Congressional Fire Services Institute (CFSI)
- International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC)
- International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF)
- International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)
- National Fraternal Order of Police (FOP)
- National Sheriffs' Association (NSA)
- National Troopers Coalition (NTC)
- National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC)

In short, this Committee will carry on with the people's work and conduct oversight into FEMA's implementation of PKEMRA.

Two weeks ago, this Subcommittee held a forward-looking hearing and heard from a panel of witnesses that gave us their expertise on how public assistance from FEMA can be leveraged by State and local governments expedite and make efficient the recovery process.

Today, we are also looking ahead by examining the status of implementing PKEMRA, how PKEMRA is working to strengthen FEMA within the Department of Homeland Security, and what suggestions they have to strengthen PKEMRA with authorizing legislation.

With that, I want to welcome the following witnesses.

Our first witness is Mr. Richard Skinner, Inspector General (OIG) at the Department of Homeland Security. Mr. Skinner will discuss his February 11th memo to Secretary Napolitano which centered on how PKEMRA strengthened FEMA within DHS and why it is in the Nation's best interest for FEMA to remain in the Department.

Next, the Subcommittee will hear from William "Bill" Jenkins, Director, Homeland Security & Justice, U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). Mr. Jenkins will explain GAO's assessment of FEMA's implementation of PKEMRA.

Our third witness – Mr. Corey Gruber, Acting Deputy Administrator, National Preparedness Directorate at FEMA –will discuss FEMA's implementation of PKEMRA as well as provide the Subcommittee suggestions for legislation to improve FEMA's capacity under the law.

Our fourth witness is Ms. Mary Troupe, Executive Director of the Mississippi Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities. Ms. Troupe will provide us with some suggestions about how to strengthen the Disability Coordinator office established under PKEMRA.

Our final witness is Daniel Kaniewski, Deputy Director, Homeland Security Policy Institute, George Washington University. Mr. Kaniewski will discuss how PKEMRA has restored FEMA's capacity to prepare for, respond to, and recover from large-scale events.

As the Subcommittee receives the testimony from the panel, I want to note that a lot of time, energy, and resources have been invested in PKEMRA and FEMA itself. So I am looking forward to testimony that illustrate to the American people that the investments into PKEMRA and FEMA benefit the Nation as a whole.