



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Joint Hearing Statement of Emergency Management & Technology Subcommittee Ranking Member Troy Carter (D-LA)

Unmanned Aerial Systems: An Examination of the Use of Drones in Emergency Response

May 15, 2024

Drones offer rapid aerial assessment capabilities, providing real-time views of disaster areas. They can comb through flooded areas, fires, wildfires, or collapsed buildings, identifying survivors and hazards.

My home district, New Orleans, is highly vulnerable to hurricanes and flooding. In such situations, drones can be incredibly useful in rapidly surveying affected neighborhoods, levees, and infrastructure. By providing a comprehensive overview of the extent of damage and potential risks, drones can aid first responders in their efforts to understand the situation better and take necessary actions. The usefulness of drones was particularly evident during Hurricane Ida, where drones were used to observe and analyze damage. By leveraging drones in emergency response efforts, particularly in disaster-prone areas like New Orleans, responders can enhance their capabilities to save lives, mitigate damage, and expedite recovery efforts.

Additionally, earlier this year, the New Orleans Police Department received approval by the Department of Justice to use drones in its investigations, which could potentially prove to be a game-changer in terms of enhancing the effectiveness of law enforcement. With Super Bowl LIX being held in New Orleans next year, it is essential for first responders to gear up and be prepared with the latest technologies at their disposal. I look forward to seeing how this capability will be used to ensure the safety and security of Louisianans.

While drones can be effective in emergency response efforts in disaster-prone areas like New Orleans, there are concerns about their use as these programs continue to grow nationwide and become easily accessible. The increasing use of drones has raised concerns about privacy and civil liberties as their capabilities for aerial surveillance and data collection continue to advance. Federal, state and local first responders need to ensure that they use drones to enhance public safety while protecting individuals' and the public's privacy and Constitutional rights.

I also look forward to speaking to our witnesses today about a few things, the first being how the Federal government can support use of drone technology by state and local first responders to enhance the efficiency, safety, and effectiveness of their efforts including via funding.

The Emergency Management and Technology Subcommittee has jurisdiction over the Department of Homeland Security Grant Programs, which can be used to purchase drones; however, these grants received a 10 percent cut for Fiscal Year 2024. The 10 percent cut not only compromises the effectiveness of first responders but also endangers communities by reducing their access to essential resources like drones. This shortfall could impair their ability to promptly address security threats and emergencies, heightening risks and diminishing overall safety levels within affected areas.

To this end, the second thing I hope to hear from our witnesses is about any concerns about the grant programs and any recommendations you may have to improve them.

Lastly, I want to give a special thank you to our first responder witnesses today for their dedication and service to our communities.

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