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Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

Ready and Resilient?: Examining Federal Emergency Preparedness and Response Capabilities

October 22, 2015 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Emergency Preparedness, Response and Communications subcommittee hearing entitled “Ready and Resilient?: Examining Federal Emergency Preparedness and Response Capabilities”:

“Yesterday, Secretary Johnson appeared before the full Committee for the first time this Congress and today marks Administrator Fugate’s first appearance.

Although I am troubled that the Committee has not had the opportunity to engage agency principals until almost half-way through the Congress, I am pleased that we are beginning to do so and look forward to additional hearings next year.

I would also like to welcome the Assistant Democratic Leader, James Clyburn, to the Committee on Homeland Security, and ask unanimous consent that he be permitted to participate in today’s hearing.

Ten years ago, Hurricane Katrina destroyed communities along the Gulf Coast, including in my home state of Mississippi.

Confusion regarding roles and responsibilities at every level of government, gaps in emergency communications technologies, and lack of effective coordination between Federal and State responders undermined immediate response efforts.

Large contractors from outside the Gulf Coast were brought in to do the work that local businesses not only could do, but needed to do themselves to rebuild and restore local economies.

Recovery activities were slow and dragged out, and too often diverse populations and small, local businesses were left out of programs to rebuild their own communities.

Almost immediately, a consensus emerged that the Federal response was woefully inadequate.

Congress responded by passing the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, which restructured FEMA and our larger emergency response infrastructure.

Three years ago, FEMA’s efforts to right the wrongs of Katrina were tested when Hurricane Sandy slammed into the East Coast.

The response reflected significant progress in the Federal government’s ability to support State and local disaster response activities, and recovery efforts were ultimately bolstered by the Sandy Recovery Improvement Act, which provided for expedited recovery opportunities.

Nevertheless, Federal response and recovery capabilities continue to face serious challenges.

For several years, I have raised concerns about FEMA’s disaster workforce and whether or not they receive adequate training.

I understand that FEMA has implemented policies to improve its training and management of the Reservist Program, but many people have left the Reservist Workforce in response.

Moreover, a recent GAO report revealed gaps in recruitment for DHS Surge Force Capacity and challenges with attrition and cost for the FEMA Corps program.

These workforce retention issues, coupled with FEMA's morale challenges, will jeopardize FEMA's future disaster response capabilities.

Additionally, I continue to have concerns about FEMA's efforts to ensure that small, locally-owned businesses in areas affected by disaster have the opportunity to compete for contracts to rebuild their communities.

According to the GAO, FEMA still cannot determine which companies are indeed "local" to an area affected by disaster and PKEMRA's requirements that pre-disaster contracts be transitioned to local contracts is not consistently enforced.

FEMA has to work harder to ensure the local small businesses are part of the recovery process and do more to enforce PKEMRA's limitations on noncompetitive disaster contracting.

Disaster recovery will be more inclusive and cost-effective as a result.

Finally, despite the ongoing challenges the FEMA continues to tackle, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Administrator Fugate for his tenacious efforts to improve how FEMA carries out its mission.

Following the failed Federal response to Hurricane Katrina ten years ago, much of the American public lost confidence in the ability of FEMA and the Federal government to render aid when it was needed most.

The FEMA-coordinated Federal response to Hurricane Sandy seven years later - though not perfect - restored much of the confidence lost after Hurricane Katrina.

Administrator Fugate, you deserve much of the credit for that.

To that end, I will be interested in learning what efforts you are undertaking now to ensure that FEMA continues down the right path during the next Administration."

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