

**FIVE YEARS LATER: LESSONS LEARNED, PROGRESS MADE, AND WORK  
REMAINING FROM HURRICANE KATRINA**

**Kevin Davis  
St. Tammany Parish President**

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Chairwoman Landrieu, Ranking Member Graham, and Members of the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery:

Let me begin by saying that on behalf of all of the residents of St. Tammany Parish, we are grateful to you for your continued support in funding our efforts to recover from Hurricane Katrina and its effects. When I spoke to you in August of 2008, I detailed the specifics of the devastation that Hurricane Katrina wreaked on our Parish. As you may recall, the eye of Katrina passed directly over Slidell, Louisiana in the southeastern portion of our Parish. A 20 foot storm surge extended for over 50 miles and came inland for over 7 miles. As a result nearly 49,000 homes were damaged. We removed almost 7 million cubic yards of debris in roadways and on private property with the assistance of FEMA and additional assistance of NRCS to remove waterway debris. We have demolished over 500 homes damaged beyond repair by Katrina. We have repaired the infrastructure and utilities which were devastated by the storm. But most importantly, we have assessed our emergency response capabilities and processes and implemented necessary changes and improvements as a result of lessons learned from Katrina. I am here today to focus on lessons learned or should I say lessons that should have been learned.

The lessons learned from Katrina are that FEMA's role in emergency response and preparedness should be focused on funding and technical assistance, not actual response. Second lesson to be learned is that as part of this focus FEMA must assess whether its rules, regulations and processes work and whether those rules and processes are being applied consistently. Third and the most important lesson to be taken from Katrina, FEMA must take into account the input and knowledge of local jurisdictions.

Let me now relate to you some examples of on-going recovery issues which St. Tammany Parish is dealing with which relate to Katrina lessons.

Though St. Tammany Parish has made great progress in its recovery, work still continues. Reconstruction of public buildings and facilities continue though temporarily halted by the insolvency of the Disaster Relief Fund announced at the beginning of this year. Hopefully with the approval by Congress of additional funds for the DRF, funding for project work sheets on these projects will begin to flow again so that these projects can resume. It is important to note that FEMA's Public Assistance Program is set forth as a reimbursement based program. However, in a disaster like Katrina, or even Hurricanes Gustav or Ike, local jurisdictions responding to the effects are not in a position to advance funds for projects. The exhaustion of the DRF and cessation of funding of project

worksheets stops the recovery process at the local level. This is something to be avoided in the future if at all possible.

Our Parish also continues to struggle with waterway debris issues. Let me explain further what I mean by waterway debris. St. Tammany Parish has 57 miles of coastline and 500 miles of waterways. It also has hundreds of rivers, creeks, and other waterways which run through it on their way to Lake Pontchartrain and the Gulf of Mexico. These waterways were choked with vegetative debris as a result of Hurricane Katrina much of which was removed through the efforts of NRCS through their emergency waterway program. However, this was only a first pass. As "second pass" was never done. Trees damaged by Hurricane Katrina which subsequently have fallen are blocking these waterways again. Vegetative debris, vehicles and other construction debris was submerged in these waterways and therefore not identified for removal, particularly in the case of FEMA project worksheets. We continue to attempt to work with FEMA to obtain PW's for this debris as it is a navigational hazard, a drainage issue and environmental concern.

In addition to vegetative debris, our Parish has other waterway debris challenges. Numerous waterfront communities in St. Tammany were obliterated by Katrina's wind and surge. The remnants of what was once waterfront housing, recreational camps, boat docks and fishing piers now stand in the coastal waters of our Parish. These remnants are piers, footings and debris which stand in the middle of waterways posing a danger to recreational and commercial boaters and emergency personnel. FEMA's position on this debris is that it is not eligible for removal because it is like the foundation of a damaged house which FEMA will also not pay to remove. This policy makes no sense. While FEMA will not as a rule pay to remove a concrete foundation on a demolished home, the remaining foundation is not a hazard vehicular traffic. The debris which remains in our coastal waterways is an imminent threat to boat traffic. It is also over time becoming floating debris which is carried through Lake Pontchartain. This is a threat to the health and safety of the general public and therefore a revision to this policy must be considered.

The third waterway debris issue which St. Tammany Parish continues to address is marsh grass and silt. Hurricane Katrina stripped thousands of cubic yards of marshland from coastal marshes and deposited them in waterways and canals. Those waterways and canals are now in many cases not navigable. In the case of the Coin du Lestin subdivision, a waterfront community in Slidell, we have been forced to incur the cost to remove this debris without assistance from FEMA. The debris is a navigational hazard and drainage impediment in a publicly maintained waterway. It is inconceivable why this work was deemed not eligible under FEMA's rules. I submit that the only reason for this ruling was the inconsistent and cavalier application of FEMA's Public Assistance program policies by biased individuals.

Be that as it may, the Parish is about to complete its work at Coin du Lestin as I speak. In fact, the work done by the Parish and its contractor at Coin du Lestin is considered by many state and federal agencies to be a model for debris removal and coastal restoration. We have removed the debris in the canals at Coin du Lestin via a dedicated delivery

dredging project. The hydraulic dredge used is piping the debris to the nearby Big Branch National Wildlife Refuge which is under the supervision of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Thus, we are removing the hurricane debris, removing the navigational and drainage threat, and restoring coastal marsh at the same time. Under FEMA's current policies such a project is prohibited. This is another area that I am urging a re-examination of the PA program.

Almost exactly two years after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita our Parish was hit by Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. Again, FEMA came in to provide assistance. While the funding was needed and we are thankful to have received it, it was readily apparent that the agency had not implemented any lessons learned from Katrina. Some of the personnel, mostly FEMA contractors, were recognizable as they were still here dealing with Katrina. However, issues with rotating out of staff every few months or weeks and lack of training were still there.

As it stands, local jurisdictions are still subject to the whim and caprice of the FEMA representative which shows up at their door with respect to eligibility calls. I suggest that this is a result of FEMA's confusion over its role in disaster response and recovery. It is obvious to me that FEMA has an inherent identity crisis. In my opinion it should leave the response and recovery to the locals and stick to its role in providing funding and technical assistance. This will allow the agency to focus on its rulemaking process and implementation of the process through state and local agencies. Let the boots on the ground carry out the response and recovery efforts as they are the ones that know how their citizenry will be best served.

I would be remiss to fail to mention the current disaster which we in Louisiana and the Gulf Coast in general, are battling--The BP Oil Spill. Needless to say this is another insult to our region and a blow to continued recovery efforts. FEMA's role in response to the BP Oil Spill is limited to date as BP, as the Responsible Party, and the U.S. Coast Guard, as the Accountable Party, are leading the effort. This is hurricane season in south Louisiana, however, and recognizing the potential for Oil Spill contamination inland as a result of a tropical storm or hurricane I have attempted to address the issue of oiled storm debris with FEMA in advance of any actual storm. In fact, I have discussed the possibility of Oil Spill contamination from a storm this season with numerous state and federal agencies and all have the same concerns regarding response. The issues range from how will oiled debris be handled and disposed of to who will fingerprint and test Oil Spill contaminants that come ashore during a tropical storm.

In order to discuss and plan for response to a storm this season with the added threat of Oil Spill contamination, I initiated a dialogue with BP, Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Coast Guard, Louisiana Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality and FEMA. All responded that they were interested in discussing and agreeing to procedures to address these unanswered questions related to the Oil Spill, except FEMA. FEMA's response to my request to discuss these issues before a storm might hit was that they were coming up with their own rules and would provide those to the Louisiana Governor's

Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness. There was no need for discussion. To date, I have received no guidance or procedures from FEMA pertaining to storm response and the handling of debris in light of possible Oil Spill contamination as a result of a 2010 hurricane.

This is just another sign that the old FEMA is still firmly in place. No lessons learned. If we are forced to respond to a hurricane with the threat Oil Spill contamination and no procedures in place in advance, chaos will ensue. It will look just like the chaos which occurred following Hurricane Katrina: a lack of clear policy, untrained and transitory personnel, inconsistent application of rules and, as a result, local frustration and a waste of taxpayer dollars.

Five years later and no lessons learned. This is a sad epitaph. I urge this Committee to consider the comments and recommendations made here and direct that appropriate changes be made within FEMA. There is a worthwhile purpose behind the Stafford Act and good people within FEMA who have been tapped to implement the rules.

In order to insure that the lessons from Hurricane Katrina are not lost, FEMA must take the following actions: 1) reexamine the Agency's mission and focus on providing funding and technical assistance to state and local jurisdictions, 2) reassess its regulations, rules and processes which are currently in place to determine what does and does not work pertaining to Public Assistance and other program administered by the Agency, 2) consider the input of state and local jurisdictions in reassessing its rules, regulations and processes.

I hope that these frank and candid comments help the work of this Committee. I thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today and for the Committee's continued support in Louisiana's recovery efforts.