

Congress of the United States  
Washington, D.C. 20515  
June 26, 2006

**JOIN FEMA'S WORKERS AND  
THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT  
EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO, IN SUPPORT OF H.R. 5316  
TO RESTORE FEMA'S INDEPENDENCE &  
EFFECTIVENESS**

Dear Colleague:

In the near future, the House may consider H.R. 5316, the RESPOND Act, which will help restore the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to the same effective agency that it was before it was subsumed by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). *We urge you to join FEMA's workers and the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), AFL-CIO, in support of H.R. 5316. Please cosponsor the bill and oppose any amendments to keep FEMA in DHS.*

*In a June 13, 2006 letter, AFGE, which represents 600,000 government workers including 1,200 FEMA employees throughout the United States, writes: "we strongly support H.R. 5316, which would remove the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and restore FEMA to its status as an independent agency reporting directly to the President .... We need to restore America's ability to protect her people in time of emergency. H.R. 5316 will go a long way toward that goal."*

Putting FEMA into the newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was the wrong thing to do. It trapped a once nimble, 2,500-person agency in a massive bureaucracy with 190,000 workers and multiple layers of management. Since becoming part of DHS, FEMA has been degraded, downsized, and demoralized due to conflicting missions. As AFGE states:

The theory [of merging FEMA into DHS] looked good on paper, but bureaucratic realities soon took hold. Long-time FEMA managers with years of experience were pushed aside. FEMA's clearly-written and straightforward Federal Response Plan was junked in favor of a new National Response Plan, a voluminous and often unclear document. The Preparedness function was taken out of FEMA, and FEMA's budget was cannibalized and much of it given to DHS.

In two short years, FEMA went from being one of the most effective and well-respected agencies in the Federal government to the mismanaged, ineffective agency we witnessed during Hurricane Katrina.

Hurricane Katrina showed that FEMA and the federal government's disaster management system are broken. The RESPOND Act will fix them. The **RESPOND Act** will:

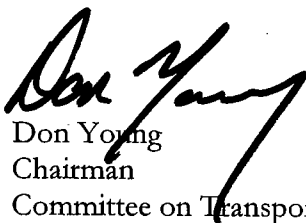
- Restore FEMA to an independent, cabinet-level agency with the Director reporting directly to the President;
- Require that the Director of FEMA be qualified and have extensive experience in emergency management;
- Ensure that FEMA's core functions of preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation activities once again coexist and work together;
- Greatly strengthen FEMA by providing it with the tools necessary to rebuild a competent workforce; and
- Create a comprehensive emergency preparedness system to ensure that all levels of government are prepared to effectively respond to a disaster.

Simply rebuilding FEMA within DHS will not solve the problem. Leaving FEMA in DHS would perpetuate a confused chain of command and a layer of bureaucracy between the President and his top disaster advisor. As AFGE notes, during Hurricane Katrina, "the leadership of DHS interfered constantly in the midst of the hurricane response, continually distracting FEMA staff from their crucial emergency response tasks to instead develop endless reports for the DHS Secretary's press conferences." One FEMA employee described DHS as "a ball and chain around FEMA's ankle" during Hurricane Katrina.

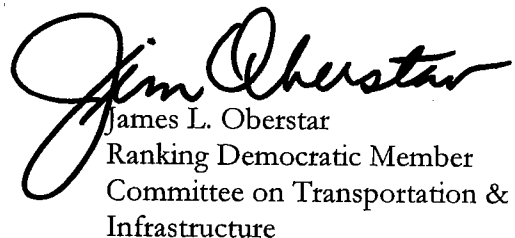
*We urge you to support H.R. 5316 and oppose any amendments to keep FEMA in DHS.*

Attached is a copy of the June 13, 2006 AFGE letter. For more information or to cosponsor the bill, please contact the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure staff at ext. 53014 (Republican staff) or ext. 64697 (Democratic staff).

Sincerely,



Don Young  
Chairman  
Committee on Transportation &  
Infrastructure



James L. Oberstar  
Ranking Democratic Member  
Committee on Transportation &  
Infrastructure



Tom Davis  
Chairman  
Select Committee to Investigate the  
Preparation for and Response to  
Hurricane Katrina



Eleanor Holmes Norton  
Ranking Democratic Member  
Subcommittee on Economic  
Development, Public Buildings,  
& Emergency Management

June 13, 2006

The Honorable Don Young  
Chairman, Transportation and Infrastructure Committee  
2165 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Young,

On behalf of the American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO, we strongly support H.R. 5316, which would remove the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and restore FEMA to its status as an independent agency reporting directly to the President.

AFGE represents approximately 1200 full-time Federal employees working at FEMA all over the country. Our members are emergency management professionals, and we understand the criticality of FEMA's mission from our own first-hand experience.

FEMA was established in 1979 to coordinate Federal efforts to protect American lives and property from the consequences of emergencies and disasters. This protection takes place in four phases:

- Response – When a disaster occurs, the Federal Government must be able to respond quickly to protect life and property.
- Recovery – Once immediate lifesaving needs have been addressed, the rebuilding begins, both of structures and of people's lives.
- Mitigation – Steps must be taken to rebuild wisely so as to prevent similar disasters from occurring again, or reducing their impacts if they do.
- Preparedness – All levels of government and business as well as private individuals must train and prepare for the next disaster.

These four phases in the cycle of emergency management – Response, Recovery, Mitigation, and Preparedness – form the core of activities that have allowed FEMA to carry out its mission.

Over the years, FEMA professionals have worked with our partner Federal agencies and the American Red Cross to build and strengthen this cycle. For example:

- When terrorists bombed the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, FEMA **response** was on the way within hours of the incident.
- Many local rescuers in Oklahoma City credited FEMA **preparedness and training** in part for the swift local response to the bombing.
- When the Nisqually earthquake struck Seattle in 2001, damage was minimized and no lives were lost...thanks in part to FEMA's earthquake hazard **mitigation** program.
- And citizens across America have counted on FEMA's **recovery** programs to help rebuild after floods, hurricanes, and other devastating disasters.

When terrorists attacked the U.S. on September 11, 2001, FEMA once again responded quickly and effectively. But afterward, in the rush to strengthen America's defenses against terrorism, FEMA was merged into the newly-created Homeland Security Department. The theory looked good on paper, but bureaucratic realities soon took hold. Long-time FEMA managers with years of experience were pushed aside. FEMA's clearly-written and straightforward Federal Response Plan was junked in favor of a new National Response Plan, a voluminous and often unclear document. The Preparedness function was taken out of FEMA, and FEMA's budget was cannibalized and much of it given to DHS.

By the time Hurricane Katrina struck in August 2005, nearly one-third of FEMA's full-time jobs were vacant. Neither the FEMA Director nor the DHS Secretary were experienced emergency managers, and so they misunderstood or ignored the urgent warnings they received from FEMA staff. FEMA employees did their best, struggling with malfunctioning computers, supply shortages, and confusing plans, often working 12 hours or more a day for months at a time to help the victims of the storm.

Worst of all, rather than supporting FEMA's efforts, the leadership of DHS interfered constantly in the midst of the hurricane response, continually distracting FEMA staff from their crucial emergency response tasks to instead develop endless reports for the DHS Secretary's press conferences. One of my colleagues who worked the disaster described DHS as "a ball and chain around FEMA's ankle."

In summary, the merger of FEMA into DHS may have sounded good in theory, but in reality it has proven to be impractical and counterproductive. When Hurricane Katrina struck the U.S., the DHS structure simply imposed an extra layer of bureaucracy on top of FEMA, and wound up impeding, not assisting, the response. This must not happen again.

AFGE strongly recommends that FEMA be taken out of DHS and re-established as an independent agency, including the Preparedness function, and report directly to the President. We need to restore America's ability to protect her people in time of emergency. H.R. 5316 will go a long way toward that goal.

Sincerely yours,

Beth Moten  
Legislative and Political Director

