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Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives  
Committee on Appropriations  
Washington, DC 20515-6015

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Dear Colleague:

When the House considers legislation creating a new department to administer some aspects of homeland security, I expect that we may be asked to vote on whether or not the Federal Emergency Management Administration should be a part of that new department. I think there are three things that members should keep in mind when they vote on that question.

First, while FEMA is an agency that most people do not think about most of the time, it can be the most important agency in the federal government at particular points in time. This is true on a nationwide basis when the country grapples with how to help the victims of a recent disaster. It is far truer when a disaster hits your home state and you bare some responsibility for the quality of the federal response.

Second, many people have already forgotten that less than a decade ago FEMA was a deeply troubled agency that seemed incapable responding to even the most routine emergencies. *The San Francisco Chronicle* wrote in 1989, "Many disaster victims have come to agree with Senator Ernest Hollings D-SC, who called FEMA officials 'the sorriest bunch of bureaucratic jackasses I have ever encountered in my life.'" *The Washington Times* stated, "The nearly derelict response of FEMA to the disaster wrought by Hurricane Hugo reveals an office bottled up by its own bureaucracy, penury and the lack of presidential initiative."

Third, the individual broadly viewed as the spark plug that turned FEMA around, James Lee Witt, believes that it would be a huge mistake to put the disaster response functions of FEMA into the new Department. That would "diminish the focus" of the Department and "dismantle what only recently has become a successful and vital agency."

I am attaching a memo that he recently wrote on this issue.

Sincerely,



Dave Obey



## Department of Homeland Security and FEMA

The President has asserted that there is a need to consolidate functions spread among several agencies in order to give better focus to National or Homeland Security and counter-terrorism activities. He is absolutely on target and is showing great leadership in proposing to do this. The creation of a cabinet level Department of Homeland Security whose Secretary has budget and operational authority over these activities is long overdue and should help to better coordinate these efforts. However, the Administration's proposal to place all of FEMA into the new Department of Homeland Security will diminish the focus of this new and important agency and will dismantle what only recently has become a successful and vital agency.

Many have argued for the need to bifurcate portions of various agencies that are being folded into the new Homeland Security Department. There is probably no more compelling case than the arguments to separate FEMA's natural disaster responsibilities from its national or homeland security responsibilities. These arguments are based on historical precedent and should be considered when looking at the current proposal.

### Background

- Over the last decade FEMA has responded to more than 500 emergency and major disaster events. Two of these were related to terrorism (Oklahoma City and New York City).
- FEMA has become a model agency by focusing on its prime mission: responding to disasters and trying to reduce their impact in the future.
- FEMA was created in 1979 from components in five different Departments and Agencies to be the one focal point for emergency assistance.
- The intention to have FEMA as the one focal point for emergencies was subsumed, during the 1980's, by FEMA's civil defense component. This helps to explain the lackluster responses to Hurricanes Hugo and Andrew.
- In 1993, FEMA's National Preparedness Directorate staff (civil defense) outnumbered natural disaster and mitigation staff by a 5 to 1 ratio.
- Over the past decade, staffing and resources were aligned to more accurately reflected the risks and hazards facing communities on a regular basis.
- Reorganizations of FEMA, within the last year, are leading down a path that is recreating that previous imbalance. FEMA's new Office of National Preparedness has already taken many staff from the Disaster Response & Recovery and Mitigation Directorates. In a further diluting of mission, the all responsibility for disaster training has been placed under FEMA's U.S. Fire Administration.
- In the atmosphere of the past year (including the period prior to September 11<sup>th</sup>) the devotion to terrorism planning has already affected the FEMA mission. All the momentum for pre-disaster mitigation work with communities has been lost. **Folding FEMA into a homeland or national security agency will seriously compromise the nation's previously effective response to natural hazards.**

## Rationale

- FEMA realized its true potential in the last decade largely because of its size, independent nature, and focus on a specific mission. FEMA's size has ensured that it is agile and able to respond quickly to new situations following a disaster. Its independence has allowed it to effectively coordinate the resources of 26 federal agencies following disaster events. FEMA refined its mission "to reduce loss of life and property through a comprehensive, risk-based, emergency management program of mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.
- While related, the mission of the Office of Homeland Security is more specifically "to develop and coordinate the implementation of a comprehensive national strategy to secure the United States from terrorist threats or attacks." This would seem to imply better coordination of intelligence, border/immigration issues, and aspects related to specific weapons of mass destruction and their potential for use on American soil.

## Proposal

- FEMA's Office of National Preparedness and all National Security related programs should be moved to the Department of Homeland Security, but the rest of FEMA should be left in place as an Independent Agency.
- The following elements would remain as an independent FEMA:  
Disaster response and recovery; natural hazard preparedness functions (such as the current hurricane program that assists States with evacuation planning); mitigation & flood insurance (this includes pre-disaster mitigation, Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, flood mapping, earthquake research, etc.); and emergency food and shelter (this is a homeless program but the non-profit partners in the program are also FEMA's typical partners in helping disaster victims).
  - Congress should amend the Robert T. Stafford Act to allow the Secretary of Homeland Security to tap the existing infrastructure at FEMA for responding to and assisting with recovery efforts in the event of a man-made disaster in the same way it would following a natural disaster.

## Conclusion

- It is important to keep the focus of FEMA on reducing natural hazard risks across the nation and responding quickly and comprehensively when disasters do occur.
- The push for improved homeland security should not detract from the positive steps the country has taken in disaster response, recovery and mitigation.
- A Department of Homeland Security that has a focused mission and does not include a patchwork of unrelated programs will have a much greater chance at success. A successful Department of Homeland Security will ensure that horrible events, such as the WTC attacks, continue to be extremely rare occurrences and much less common than the hundreds of floods, tornados, and hurricanes that affect our nation each year.

With this proposal, the assets of FEMA could easily be tapped to deal with what we hope continues to be an extremely uncommon occurrence - a terrorist attack on American soil - without changing the entire focus of the agency.