

**THE HONORABLE MIKE BEEBE
GOVERNOR, STATE OF ARKANSAS**

**TESTIMONY
BEFORE THE**

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

ON

FEMA DISASTER RESPONSE

THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MARCH 15, 2007

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the severe weather and tornadoes that recently struck Arkansas and the resulting federal response.

All Arkansans owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Congressman Mike Ross, Senators Mark Pryor and Blanche Lincoln, and all the State's federal delegation for their work to support and help rebuild the communities affected by the recent storms.

Obtaining help for our citizens in need certainly has not been a partisan effort, but it has, instead, been an Arkansas effort, one on behalf of the people of our State.

But let me be clear, even without the support of the President for an Emergency Declaration and without the support of FEMA, we did not wait before taking action. In my State, as long as an Arkansan has one good hand to extend, we will take care of our own.

On February 24, 2007, severe storms, including heavy rainfall and high winds, struck the South Arkansas counties of Bradley, Desha, Drew, and Union. As part of that weather system, an F3 tornado touched down in Desha County, leaving lives, homes, and businesses in shambles.

While we were fortunate that no deaths resulted directly from the severe weather, there was enormous damage to the communities affected, to homes, businesses, and the lives of our people were terribly disrupted:

- Desha County, worst hit by the tornadoes, had 27 people injured, including two hospitalized in critical condition;
- Bradley County reported six injuries, including one life-threatening injury; and
- In Union County, three individuals were transported to the hospital with minor injuries.

Two highways, one in Dumas and one from Dumas to DeWitt, were temporarily shut down and traffic rerouted. On Tuesday, February 27th, Highway 65 was reopened.

A power substation was also destroyed in Dumas. A total of 2,800 customers were without power. As of March 1, 90 percent of the power had been restored.

While this data describes major inconveniences, it says nothing of the long-term physical destruction Arkansans are dealing with. The residential damage in South Arkansas was expansive:

- Ashley County reported minor damage to only one home in North Crossett;
- Bradley County saw five homes suffer damage;
- Drew County had two houses damaged;
- Union County reported that 10 homes were damaged; and
- Desha County lost a total of 37 homes, including 17 mobile homes that were completely destroyed. Another 25 homes sustained major damage, and minor damage was inflicted on upwards of roughly 60 homes.

The storms and tornadoes devastated many Desha County public facilities, including:

- The City Park;
- Baseball fields;
- The Community Building; and
- Twenty assisted-living units.

In addition, a school building in Reed, Arkansas, must be repaired following major roof damage.

The severe weather and tornadoes wreaked havoc on the businesses of Desha County:

- Multiple businesses in downtown Dumas were destroyed, a total of 25; and
- Nine businesses suffered major damage with more sustaining at least some destruction.

Of the communities impacted, Dumas sustained the greatest economic devastation.

Dumas Mayor Marion Gill has reported an approximate loss of \$775,000 from this disaster. That figure includes:

- Clean-up and landfill costs;
- Rental of 11 electric generators;

- Traffic light restoration;
- Overtime for city employees;
- Hiring of extra part-time employees;
- Fuel costs;
- Loss in real-estate taxes; and
- Destruction of the Community Center, previously hosting 40 community events per month.

The impact on jobs for a community of 5,000 is staggering.

- The largest single private employer in Dumas, Federal-Mogul Corporation, employing 275 people, was severely damaged;
- Akin Industries Inc., employing 175 people, was severely damaged;
- Arkat Nutrition, employing 120 people, was severely damaged.

The day after the tornado, 800 Arkansans in a community of 5,000 woke up without their jobs. The Arkansas Department of Workforce Services has, so far, counted 450 affected individuals and expects that a total of approximately 500 previously employed workers will be out of work for an extended time; this is roughly 10 percent of the Dumas population.

As hard as all of this is to bear, none of it can even begin to describe the toll on human lives. For every home obliterated or devastatingly damaged, there is a family who has lost everything except each other. For every business decimated or badly damaged, there is a dream postponed. For every day that passed without federal response, there was a trust betrayed.

Given the magnitude of devastation, I immediately declared Desha, Drew, and Union Counties state disaster areas on Monday, February 26, 2007. On Wednesday, February 28, 2007, I added Bradley County to that list, as more damage there became apparent. Within hours following the disaster, I had my own staff on the ground, along with emergency responders, State Police, National Guard Troops, officials of the Arkansas Department of Emergency Management, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, Arkansas Forestry Commission, and the Arkansas Department of Correction. As a result, I authorized more than \$200,000 from the Governor's Disaster Fund to help those in the afflicted areas.

On February 24, 2007, the afternoon of the storms, my administration set up the State Emergency Operations Center in response to damages and resources requested in the Dumas area of Desha County. Area coordinators were dispatched to the affected area to coordinate responses and provide technical advice.

The greatest impact was seen in neighbor helping neighbor. Communities came together as churches became shelters and the Salvation Army and other groups began to serve hot meals to those in need.

And amidst all of this, we were hoping for aid from FEMA. On Tuesday, February 27, the third day after the storm, I requested federal aid in the form of an Emergency Declaration, including

direct federal assistance, housing assistance, and low-interest loans. I made this request of President Bush in a letter addressed to William Peterson, Region VI FEMA Director.

When Arkansas has had disasters in the past, we have always attempted to use all of our own state resources to try to address our people's needs. Here is a list of the most recent State Disasters that we have dealt with, without requesting FEMA's assistance:

DR 06-23 (8/14/06): Conway County ADEM Disbursed: \$1758.00 DHHS -IFG Program: \$50,977.31

DR 06-26 (9/22/06): Clay, Fulton, Lawrence, Sharp, and Randolph: ADEM Disbursed: \$4,248.00 DHHS -IFG Program: \$418,160.76

DR 07-01 (1/13/07): Benton, Jackson, and Pope Counties ADEM Dispersed: \$12,042.50 DHHS -IFG Program: \$116,556.50

DR 07-11 (2/24/07): Bradley, Desha, Drew, Union Counties ADEM Dispersed: \$7489.00 DHHS -IFG Program: \$5,392.00

After my initial FEMA request, I met with two FEMA officials, FEMA Region VI Director William (Bill) Peterson and Deputy Director Gary Jones, in a regularly scheduled meeting, about the damage reports. It was not until Thursday, March 8, 2007, that I received an official comment from the Department. That was **ten** days after the initial request and **thirteen** days after the tornadoes destroyed Dumas.

On February 25, 2007, two FEMA officials and one SBA official were on the ground in Dumas performing a Preliminary Damage Assessment (PDA). Over the next few days, there were several follow-up conversations with FEMA officials about details surrounding the request and possible declaration.

Following the February 25, 2007 PDA, Arkansas Department of Emergency Management officials spoke to Response and Recovery Branch Chief Tony Robinson and FEMA Logistics Officer Wayne Fairly about the details of the PDA and the status of our declaration. David Maxwell, the Arkansas Division of Emergency Management Director, spoke with Region VI Deputy Director Gary Jones and Region VI Director William Peterson on March 5 and 6, 2007, about the request for a declaration. Maxwell also spoke with FEMA Director David Paulison on March 7 and 8, 2007, regarding the request for a declaration.

While waiting for a response from FEMA, my administration was receiving mixed messages through the media about our disaster request. There were quotes from anonymous FEMA official expressing that we were not going to receive federal assistance due to our current state budget surplus. The anonymous official suggested that we should pay for all of the damage with our surplus. I don't think it is right that Arkansas should be punished for balancing a budget better than the federal government has, especially when Georgia and Alabama are also running a budget surplus and have received federal help for natural disasters that occurred at a similar time.

There were other reports claiming that we would not receive assistance due to the percentage of damage that was privately insured. This was all being reported by the media, without attribution, as actual discussions with FEMA officials before we had ever received final confirmation of our request status.

On March 8, 2007, we received the letter from David Paulison denying our request for assistance. FEMA soon made a formal proposal of 30 FEMA trailers from the Hope Airport. On Friday March 9, 2007, in a 9:30 a.m. (CST) conference call, we were informed that we were being given 23 mobile homes and seven travel trailers. It was made clear that we could get more if needed (we subsequently did, receiving an additional nine travel trailers and one mobile home). Arkansas Department of Emergency Management staff in Hope and FEMA staff have been working cooperatively to make this an efficient and timely process. However, because our State did not receive a disaster declaration, we were left with all the financial and logistical responsibilities of moving, setting up, and supporting the trailers.

On Saturday morning, March 10, a private Arkansas transit firm began moving the trailers from the Hope Municipal Airport to Dumas at a discounted rate for the State. Though our disaster was devastating to our citizens, we would be left to bear the costs associated with any good will that FEMA was finally offering to assist our citizens.

In the aftermath of these storms, the citizens in the communities of Dumas and Backgate needed housing assistance, disaster capital, and other direct federal assistance. FEMA stated in their denial letter that,

“Based on our review of all of the information available, it has been determined that the damage to the private sector was not of such severity and magnitude as to be beyond the capabilities of the State and affected local governments. Furthermore, we have determined that supplemental Federal assistance is not necessary. Therefore, I must inform you that your request for an emergency declaration is denied.”

The dozens of Arkansans whose homes and businesses were destroyed would disagree with FEMA, I believe. I think those individuals whose businesses and homes were wiped out would believe the “damage” was “of such severity and magnitude” as to warrant help. I would agree with them.

Arkansans help pay for FEMA disaster relief. We all hope that our tax dollars were among the FEMA assistance funds that went to tornado victims in Alabama and Georgia, because people throughout our State feel empathy for those who saw their lives torn apart by storms. We only regret that FEMA declined to respond in a similar way in Arkansas, but instead waited 12 days after a disaster to tell us no help would be coming, based on reasoning that defies common sense.

Thankfully, recognizing the level of disaster in our state, the Small Business Administration granted my request for disaster loans for the people of Arkansas. These low-interest, long-term loans will help individuals and families rebuild their homes and businesses. For that, our State is grateful.

While we are aware of certain criteria, in Title 44, Chapter 206, Section 38, for individual and public assistance, there is allowed a great deal of subjectivity in that criteria. And, it remains unsaid and unclear exactly what in that subjectivity prevented Arkansas from warranting a federal declaration. How many homes and businesses must be destroyed? How many lives must be put on hold by disaster before FEMA decides to provide the emergency help our tax dollars pay for?

Arkansas's federal delegation has been resolute and steadfast during this disaster, providing their support and a unified voice for the residents of Desha County. I must again thank Representative Mike Ross for his perseverance and attention to this disaster and for scheduling this hearing today to get answers to questions that are on the minds of all Arkansans: What exactly can states and local communities expect from the new and improved FEMA and is there not a better way of doing things?

To simplify the disaster declaration and request process, refinements must be made to ensure that the process is fair and reasonable for all states that are impacted by disasters. Some of the suggestions that the State of Arkansas puts forward for Congressional consideration include:

- Implement a better system for timely response for disaster declarations from FEMA;
- Clarify the requirements for federal aid under Title 44, Chapter 206, Section 38, Individual Assistance;
- Provide a greater understanding of the subjective factors to be considered and how they are evaluated in making the decision for an emergency declaration;
- Talk directly to state officials instead of through anonymous sources to the media;
- Make FEMA's surplus trailers available for emergency housing, but separating that process from Emergency Declarations, so the request can be considered concurrently and in a more timely manner to better serve those impacted by a natural disaster and in need of temporary housing; and
- Provide support for the transportation and set-up of FEMA surplus trailers, rather than just unlocking the gate for them to be picked up.

I have provided this testimony in hopes that it will help in finding a better resolution for the next state or community to face a disaster. Although Arkansas has the right to appeal the decision to deny our emergency declaration, our acceptance of disaster loans from the Small Business Administration will pre-empt that. Our people need the help now, not after an appeal process, and I decided on Monday, March 12, 2007, to accept the requested SBA loans as soon as they were offered.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to share Arkansas's experiences in working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency. My State is a State of action and inclusion, and as

I said at the beginning of my testimony, as long as one Arkansan has a hand to extend to another, we will take care of our own. I appreciate your attention to this important issue. With Congress focused on the transition of preparedness functions back to FEMA by March 31, 2007, I hope that the disaster declaration and relief process will be a significant issue for your oversight of the Post-Katrina FEMA Reform Act. As we move forward to recover from our recent disaster, I ask that you keep the people of Dumas, who have suffered so much and lost so much, in your thoughts and prayers.