

Senior Official Performing the Duties of the Administrator Hamilton's Remarks at the National Hurricane Conference: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future

Release Date: 4? 15, 2025

Good afternoon, everyone. I am so honored to be with you here today for this important gathering as we gear up for another hurricane season. This year's conference marks the 20-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, a storm that changed lives and the way we approach emergency management.

I will say more about Katrina in a moment, but before I do that, let me do two things:

First, I'd like to recognize Mathew Green, the lead liaison to the National Hurricane Center, and Region 4's Brandon Bolinski. Both are receiving this conference's Neil Frank Awards later this week to honor their contributions to safeguarding communities before, during and after hurricanes.

My congratulations to both of them for representing our agency in the best way possible.

Second, I'd like to take time to introduce myself to those of you who haven't met me.

I'm a former Navy SEAL, trained paramedic, husband, father and public servant. I have spent my career working in and around crises. So, when the call came to step into this role at FEMA, I answered it with honor and gratitude.

I am proud to advocate for disaster survivors, emergency managers, and the interests of the American people. I deeply believe in the FEMA mission, which is



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rooted in servant leadership— a principle I've remained committed to throughout my own career.

During the past three months, I've had the opportunity to travel around our great nation, meeting and listening to survivors of our most recent unprecedented disasters—Hurricane Helene, the Los Angeles wildfires, and the flooding across Kentucky and West Virginia.

As I hear their stories, I want to heal their heartbreak and guide them along the road to recovery as soon as possible.

This work – helping people on their darkest days – is the business of emergency management.

It is our driving force – our calling as first responders, emergency managers, weather forecasters, communicators, planners and community leaders. I could not be any prouder to stand with you all here today to protect the places we call home.

Reflecting on Katrina

We must recognize the significance of this time and place as we gather here in New Orleans two decades after Hurricane Katrina.

If you were alive during this disaster, you surely have a vivid memory of it, just as you knew where you were during 9/11, when the Challenger exploded, or during any other historic event that happened in your lifetime.

Who can forget the images of the people stranded on roofs waiting for air lifts, or wading through high waters to escape to higher ground, or crowding into the Superdome to find a place to lay their heads?

Or the videos of first responders rescuing people with military vehicles, boats, and hydrofoils or using helicopters to pluck survivors from rooftops nearly covered by water? Not to mention, the stunning images of everyday citizens using their own boats to bring their neighbors to safety.

Katrina showed us heroes are real, and they walk among us.



There will be countless commemorations across this city, this state, and the Gulf Coast region when the Hurricane Katrina anniversary arrives later this year. Soon, I will ask that we, too, pause for a moment of reflection.

Before we do that, let's consider the strength and resilience of these communities that refused to surrender to despair in the face of this previously unimaginable disaster.

This city, this state, and its people resolved to do the hard work to remake New Orleans and the Gulf Coast after Katrina. That resilience is unique to our nation's DNA – because the American story cannot be fully told without its chapter of loss, resilience and recovery.

Please join me for a moment of silence to remember all those we lost to the storm and its aftermath.

Thank you.

As soon as you touch down in New Orleans, you can feel the sense of resilience here born from the perseverance of the people who love to call this region home. You can feel the importance of community and the pride of those who rebuilt their flooded homes and businesses.

Katrina taught us hard lessons. It revealed weaknesses in our response and recovery frameworks. These lessons have become invaluable guideposts for us as we've navigated every storm since Katrina.

Post-Katrina FEMA Reform

FEMA certainly took its fair share of criticism after Katrina. However, these failings forced us to examine how we operate and made us stronger. We learned from our mistakes and have been working to evolve and regain the trust of the American people ever since.

From Hurricanes Katrina to Sandy, to Hurricanes Harvey and Irma to Hurricane Helene, we have always improved what we do with the knowledge gained from lessons learned the hard way.



We addressed mitigation following Katrina when Congress authorized funding for the Hurricane and Storm Damage Risk Reduction System (HSDRRS). This enabled the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to construct the world's largest surge barrier to protect this city.

The Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 corrected some gaps in FEMA's response processes, improving the coordination of precautionary evacuation efforts and creating an agency Disability Coordinator position.

After Hurricane Sandy, Congress passed two laws to expand FEMA's assistance capabilities and restore the region's coastlines, enhance resilience, and mitigate future flooding threats.

I had a chance to see the benefits of smart mitigation planning during a recent visit to see Kentucky flooding. I saw a 52-foot floodwall that protected the Tug Valley ARH Hospital in Kentucky. This 100- bed facility was protected from a storm surge of 48 feet by a 52-foot-tall floodwall, built with saving lives in mind.

We know at FEMA, we have to turn a page on the technology side, so we are better able to eliminate processes that create delays, backlogs and survivor frustration.

20 years ago, responders were pasting together paper maps to identify the storm zones. Today, GIS mapping can pinpoint and even predict the communities that will be hit the hardest, helping us reach them so much faster.

Stunning advancements in technology and training of personnel have made search and rescue operations more effective and efficient. Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams are now equipped with thermal imaging cameras, drones, and advanced mapping software, unheard of during Katrina.

As a more active and costly disaster environment continues to tax our systems, there must also be an increased urgency in reaching disaster survivors. I know we all are ready to answer that call to action.

Everywhere I go, I see the heroism of our country in the men and women who run toward, not away from, disasters.



One recent encounter I had was with a mayor in Kentucky after flooding in the Commonwealth. His father was one of the people who was lost to the storm, and his heart was heavy with grief. Yet, this man was still out in his community assisting others in need, living as a servant leader during a time of deep sorrow.

His dedication to public service drove him to action. Like many of you, this commitment to one another – to the common good – drives me to bring my best to work every day.

If Katrina taught us anything, it's that strengthening the ways we operate and proactively plan for disasters is a good thing. It helps us level the playing field for our vulnerable communities and their people.

We recently learned the heartbreaking story of a wheelchair-bound gentleman in Kentucky who lost his life during the flooding earlier this year. When he ventured out during the storm to collect his mail, he was unable to get back inside and froze to death.

Even recounting this story now, my heart breaks for him and his loved ones.

This is where our actions at all levels of disaster response and recovery must begin, with the theme of community—neighbors helping neighbors.

The best responders to disasters are those who know their communities best.

We have seen this idea in action in North Carolina communities impacted by Hurricane Helene. There, a newly established Community Liaison program enables local residents to work directly with survivors and lead where they live.

New ideas like this one are just the type of innovation that our field really needs right now.

Survivor-Centric Reform

Just like 20 years ago, our agency is at a pivotal moment. Once again, we have a mandate for change. It is an opportunity to become more survivor-centric and to reshape our roles in supporting our SLTT partners.



Over the last few months, I have heard many, many stories of survivors' frustrations with federal disaster response. They want us to provide resources faster with less red tape and clearer communication. They need us to remove the barriers them holding back from true recovery.

These survivors deserve our very best, and that's what we plan to deliver. Period.

That's why we must establish a federated, interlocked resource network to bring all stakeholders to the table, giving everyone a voice. Communities know their unique needs best and should be properly resourced to lead, not follow, their own response and recovery.

I know that may sound ambitious. No goal this important is easily achieved, but I know that we have the tenacity to make this dream a reality – just as our nation has done time and time again.

Preparedness Starts at Home

Because we have so many partners in this room who can amplify our messages, I want to make a plug here for individual preparedness. So, close to another hurricane season, it's time to reiterate that **preparedness must begin at home.**

As a nation, we must adapt a culture of preparedness rooted in our own networks. This ripple effect -- from our homes through our communities and up to the national level -- will lift our baseline of readiness to face the threats of today and tomorrow.

FEMA has many resources to support this concept, but it must be a team effort.

Supporting State, Local and Territorial Partners

Most of you have some position in this disaster matrix -- whether you are a communicator, a first responder, an emergency manager, or fill some other role. We intend to empower you to help you do more without federal interference.



Let me be clear – disaster survivors should not have to wait for bureaucrats in Washington, D.C., to add inefficiencies and delays to the assistance they deserve.

On April 1, FEMA marked the 46th anniversary of its role in civil defense and emergency management leadership. We have accepted a mission to help people before, during and after disasters, and that will never change.

However, we must consider the right model for providing this assistance—the right balance between federal, state, and local funding, coordination, and integration.

We know there are better ways to leverage partnerships and new technology to help with faster, more-efficient processes. We will continue the conversations about how to move FEMA forward with your help and guidance.

As we reflect on the last two decades since Katrina, consider not how far we have come, but how much further we can, and must, go. Let that thought inspire us and drive us to work together even more closely.

Right now, we are building systems to improve our information-sharing apparatus, helping us communicate with state and local partners.

These technological solutions, which we hope to implement in the coming months, will cut red tape and processing times to get survivors the resources they need that much more easily. It will involve survivors in decision making.

We must never forget that technology alone is not a substitute for the personalized, human approach our work requires.

At the end of the day, our work is about people, and more specifically, people helping people in their most challenging moments.

I know that all of you in this room can and will be a part of improving emergency management and FEMA's role in it. You are an integral part of the future of our field.

Together, we can answer the call for change and be a part of building a more prepared, ready, and secure nation for generations to come.



I thank you for your help in this important endeavor and wish you well with the rest of your conference.



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