



Testimony of John “Rusty” Russell

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Before the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications

Committee on Homeland Security

U.S. House of Representatives

Weathering the Storm: A State and Local Perspective on Emergency Management

June 10, 2011

Chairman Bilirakis, Ranking Member Richardson, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee thank you for this opportunity to share ideas and provide testimony on this vital topic. I am John “Rusty” Russell, the Director of Emergency Management for Madison County, Alabama. I have been a local government emergency manager for sixteen years after serving in the U.S. Army for twenty-two years, and retiring as a Master Sergeant.

I have also served as the President of Region IV of the U.S. Council of the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM-USA) and as President of the Alabama Association of Emergency Managers. I am providing this statement on behalf of IAEM-USA on the disaster response in Alabama and how the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is responding.

IAEM is our nation’s largest association of emergency management professionals, with 5,000 members including emergency managers at the state and local government levels, tribal nations, the military, colleges and universities, private business and the nonprofit sector. Most of our members are U.S. city and county emergency managers who perform the crucial function of coordinating and integrating the efforts at the local level to prepare for, mitigate the effects of, respond to, and recover from all types of disasters including terrorist attacks. We deeply appreciate the Subcommittee’s interest in strengthening emergency management and particularly your outreach to local emergency managers.

My jurisdiction is Madison County in north central Alabama, which has a population of 360,000. We have a major concentration of highly technological industry to support the National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA), the Army’s aviation and missile programs and

other high tech government initiatives. The city of Huntsville has the second largest research park and the largest population of scientists and engineers in the country. The Tennessee River forms the southern border of the county and is a major river transportation corridor. We are served by an international airport, two railroads and an interstate highway.

Madison County has a history of being pro-active in community preparedness. Since 1971, sixteen counties in north Alabama have been members of the North Alabama Mutual Aid Association. The association consists of local Emergency Management Agencies (EMA) and the extended community of response and public safety organizations such as the Alabama Department of Environmental Resources, Department of Public Health, National Weather Service, and local, state and congressional elected official's staff members. Every county and city government has signed our mutual aid agreement. Coordination and response from county-to-county has become almost automatic and is encouraged by the state. The majority of emergency incidents are coordinated locally without help from the state or federal agencies. It is the practice of our association that local resources should be used first. We are very supportive of planning for the "Whole Community"; in fact we have been planning as a whole community at the local level since the Civil Defense days.

Almost anyone in Emergency Management has studied the great tornado outbreak of 1974. On April 3, 1974, one hundred and forty-eight tornadoes struck thirteen states. In comparison, on April 15, 2011, there were forty-eight tornadoes and on April 27, fifty-five more in Alabama alone.

The April 27<sup>th</sup> tornadoes trained across the northern two thirds of the state for nearly 18 hours. In some areas as many as four storm tracks overlapped each other.

The swarm of tornadoes killed 241 people across Alabama and destroyed or heavily damaged more than 13,000 buildings statewide. The American Red Cross said its statewide assessment of damaged residences showed that twisters destroyed 6,237 single-family homes across Alabama and heavily damaged another 5,039 homes. Of these, 1,890 were mobile homes.

To add insult to injury, electrical power was lost to most of North Alabama for five to seven days. Not only were we facing the devastation from the tornadoes but we now had an energy crisis as well. North Alabama is serviced by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). A large section of their major transmission line system was destroyed. Large generators had to be brought in to keep water systems and other critical infrastructure from failing. County-wide curfews were initiated to stem looting and to keep people safely away from the damaged areas during the night. In the night sky, without the lights of the city, there were more visible stars than I had ever imagined. You could actually see tiny satellites moving if you looked carefully.

Power was restored slowly and incrementally as they rebuilt the system. A significant area did not get power back until seven days after the storm. As you can imagine, this greatly compounded the emergency as the local utility companies could not begin their repairs until the

TVA lines were rebuilt. We had spent hours and hours discussing generators in our National Incident Management System (NIMS) resource typing workshops, but we still learned more about generators, the problems they solve and the problems they cause than I ever wanted to know.

This is expected to be the most costly disaster our state has ever faced. The event caused an estimated \$4.2 billion in damages with insured losses between \$2 and \$3 billion.

I am pleased to report that FEMA has responded to Alabama's needs in a much more efficient way than in past disasters. The affected counties were assigned a FEMA liaison during the initial response which greatly enhanced the flow of information and coordination. During a discussion with our county's FEMA liaison, he said the mind set of FEMA has changed over the past few years from preparing to respond three days after the disaster to preparing for immediate response in the affected state or five days prior to landfall for a hurricane. I can speak first hand to the response during Hurricane Ivan and Hurricane Katrina and the difference between then and now, is night and day. Anyone working in response activities across Alabama will quickly realize that there is a true partnership between local, state and federal organizations. The much needed resources are being efficiently delivered on time and where they are most needed.

In my county, over 16,000 residents have already been registered by FEMA for disaster assistance. We were able to expand the Disaster Recovery Center (DRC) to include not only FEMA and the Small Business Administration (SBA) but also Social Security Administration (SSA), Veteran's Administration (VA), local builders association, local real-estate association, Better Business Bureau (BBB), crisis counseling, and Faith Based and Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters (VOAD) representatives. The FEMA folks were actively engaged in providing one stop service for the affected families.

FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers have begun to initiate a new program called "Operation Clean Sweep". This program will enable property owners in the worst impacted areas to apply for assistance to remove debris from their private property. They must submit a right of entry form to the Corps. This program when proven successful will be a major leap towards the recovery of communities during future disasters.

Another example of FEMA's new nimbleness could be a change in the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program which provides post disaster assistance. The availability of post disaster mitigation funds normally takes eight months to a year after the disaster. Currently, at the request of the local communities, Alabama and FEMA are trying to coordinate for the immediate availability of a significant portion of the anticipated post disaster mitigation funding for Alabama's tornadoes. This will be the biggest rebuild effort Alabama has ever faced. People want to start rebuilding now and may not take protective measures like in-home safe rooms and community shelters if mitigation funds are not readily available for another year. If this first time "early" funding becomes a reality, we can start planning and building back for a safer community after only one or two months instead of one or two years. It would be a substantial benefit to disaster survivors nationwide if the post disaster mitigation program was streamlined similarly for future disasters.

I can faithfully say, based on the response I have witnessed in Alabama, and the willingness to tailor their efforts to our needs, FEMA has come a long way from years past.

While the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) is not a FEMA run program, there are FEMA reimbursement issues associated with it. (EMAC) is the agreement between all fifty states ratified by Congress that provides form and structure to interstate mutual aid. EMAC works well to get the right resources to the right place in time to conduct emergency rescue and response in the impacted area. However, some states have had problems with the reimbursement process. Alabama's counties and cities were able to provide resources to other gulf states through EMAC within 48 hours and some counties were still not reimbursed after 30 months or longer.

The Madison Fire Department's heavy rescue unit was deployed during Hurricane Katrina in September 2006. While the response was immediate and the mission only lasted a couple of weeks, it took until June 2008 to get them fully reimbursed.

The Madison Fire Department's Heavy Rescue Unit was deployed again along with a Team of Madison County Sheriff's Deputies during the Hurricane Gustav response in September 2008. Once again, the response was immediate and the mission was completed within a couple of weeks, however, it took until January 2010 to get them reimbursed.

Cullman County opened a shelter under EMAC to house evacuees from Hurricane Gustav. Since Cullman County has a relatively small police department, off duty officers were brought in to provide security at the shelter. The reimbursement claim for approximately \$40,000 was paid in January 2011. It would seem that \$40,000 is not such a large amount; but to a small police department, it was a budget buster.

It is our fear that slow reimbursement will eventually result in reluctance to lend critical resources under EMAC due to the adverse economic impact on local budgets.

Over the past few years, FEMA's Emergency Management Institute (EMI) in Emmitsburg, Maryland has greatly increased the training that is available to emergency managers and responders. Increasingly frequent delivery of these courses in state and local venues as well as the development and update of many new on-line courses has lead to a stronger more robust emergency management community in Alabama. Last year our staff was able to attend both debris management and volunteer management training. During our internal after action review, we were discussing how relevant the training is and reviewing the course list to see what else we could have benefitted from in the aftermath of the storm. There were several new courses since the last time I reviewed the list. Recommended training will be part of our after action review and we will be even better prepared next time.

For the last few years, the state of Alabama has passed through a substantial percentage of Emergency Management Program Grant (EMPG) funding to local EMAs. Building strong local programs and fostering statewide mutual aid agreements enabled counties to quickly assess the extent of and begin the response to a truly catastrophic disaster before the wind stopped blowing. Counties were helping each other during the initial response and are still providing

mutual aid as we speak. EMPG with its history stretching over five decades continues to allow local and state governments to develop basic emergency management capability even in these difficult economic times. In the absence of EMPG funding, there are counties in Alabama that would not have full time emergency managers. It is fundamentally different than the post September 11, 2001 homeland security grants, and symbolizes the true partnership between local and state governments with its 50 percent cost share. EMPG has enabled Alabama to develop a well trained and experienced cadre of emergency managers and is demonstrated by our rapid transition from response to recovery in light of the severity of the event.

Through strong county programs in Alabama, we were able to build partnerships with government, volunteer, non-profit and private sector organizations. These partnerships resulted in some remarkable accomplishments.

Our local Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) has been recruiting member organizations for the past seven years. The various faith-based and volunteer groups have developed internal guidance which helps to minimize duplication of effort and improve efficiency in resource allocation within the community. On a regular basis, they sponsor training events and participate in the county's exercise program. As an Emergency Management Director, I am blessed to have one stop shopping for the management of volunteer and donated resources during an emergency. The utilization of volunteer reception centers and the ability to match volunteer resources with the unmet needs in the community, greatly improved our ability to respond and recover. The credentialing of volunteers also helped provide controlled access to the impacted areas during the response.

Alabama has actively embraced the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program from its inception. With a portion of our EMPG and Citizen Corps funding, our county has trained more than 540 people and 30 teams including employee groups at local businesses such as Teledyne Brown, SAIC, Dynetics Corporation, The U.S. Space and Rocket Center as well as many neighborhoods. During the recent disaster, they served in the volunteer reception centers as coordinators and as leaders for groups of untrained spontaneous volunteers in the field. Some counties used CERT teams to distribute ice, water, food and tarps in the affected areas. Others had their CERT teams active in the immediate response. Billy Green, Assistant Director for Tuscaloosa EMA, writes:

"I guess my biggest highlight is on Saturday April 23 I graduated my first all Hispanic CERT Team. They were members of the Knights of Columbus from Holy Spirit. Who would have ever known that on Wednesday they would be putting all their skills to use? Several of them lived in the Alberta City area that was affected. They came together and first began search and rescue. I was actually unaware of them getting out until we took the tour with the Governor and I look up and there is a truck load of Hispanic guys wearing CERT vests and helmets. Those were my guys!!!! I actually got a call from Indiana about their use of Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) markings. They would later assist the Tuscaloosa Police Department as translators. They would go on to staff a shelter at Holy Spirit Catholic Church. I'm really proud of them. I also had several individuals from my Campus CERT Class that helped out in the areas where they lived.

They however, acted individually and not as a group. But they used the training to take care of themselves which allowed them to help their neighbor. One of them has volunteered at our Volunteer Reception Center and is now working for the City of Tuscaloosa as part of the disaster response.”

The Metropolitan Medical Response System (MMRS) funding has been the cornerstone of our medical and responder team building since 2002. We have been able to develop plans and build medical response capability in fourteen counties across north Alabama. We were able to provide training and exercises that have added cohesion to the way traditional responders and medical professionals work together during emergencies.

In November, 2007, a Huntsville City School bus with a driver and 41 students plunged seventy-five feet from an interstate overpass in Huntsville. The bus landed vertically and toppled over killing three students and injuring several others. The response was immediate and working within the MMRS plan forty students were transported to our two major hospitals within the first fifty minutes after the accident. The actual emergency part of the response was quickly and definitively over after one hour although the media frenzy and the investigation lasted for months. The very same responders and hospital personnel had participated in an eerily similar exercise just days before which involved a simulated airplane crash.

During and after the 18 hour onslaught of the recent tornadoes, responders and medical teams were activated and the emergency medical equipment and supplies provided through the MMRS program were deployed and used in the impacted areas of even the most rural counties. The planning and training paid off and surely helped save many lives as trauma victims were quickly triaged and cared for. In my county, 49 patients were dug out of the debris and transported during the first 24 hours. Hundreds self presented to the emergency rooms over the next few days. Responders and hospital staff were readily able to coordinate and communicate and provide efficient patient tracking.

The North Alabama Medical Reserve Corp (MRC), now more than three hundred members strong, was developed as an MMRS initiative in 2006. Our MRC is comprised of retired and active medical and non-medical professionals and serves sixteen counties. On a daily basis, they staff the county’s free clinic and assist with medical and health related outreach programs in schools and senior centers. They man booths at community events to give out brochures, answer questions, and even check blood pressure. They provide comfort stations during sporting events in our summer heat. They assist the Health Department in the fall with the flu vaccines. In partnership with the Alabama Department of Public Health, we provided continuing education opportunities so retired professionals could maintain their certifications. The MRC is also a member of our VOAD.

During the storms, MRC teams were deployed immediately. They staffed 211 lines and medical hot lines which handled thousands of calls from confused and anxious citizens. They also established and staffed temporary clinics in the impacted areas to administer tetanus vaccine and treatment of minor injuries.

Cullman County's State Mortuary Team (SMORT) that was partially funded by MMRS was deployed in north east Alabama. Twenty-six victims were respectfully processed there during the initial response.

Each year there is a proposal to severely cut or do away with the MMRS program. Loss of MMRS funding will result in degradation of the ability to maintain and coordinate these essential capabilities. MMRS needs to be maintained as a separate program.

In conclusion, while FEMA has been sluggish and bogged down by bureaucratic oversight in the past, there seems to be a revitalization of the attitude and purpose in the FEMA folks I have dealt with during this event. If the long established and proven federal, state and local partnership programs, EMPG, MMRS and CERT can be maintained or enhanced and the innovative Clean Sweep and HMGP program changes I have discussed become reality, disaster survivors will be further down the road to their "new normal" more quickly than any time in the past decade. It seems that reduction of red tape and striving to do the right thing because it is the right thing will actually work after all. I would be happy to answer any questions at this time.

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