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Senate Report Urges Dismantling of FEMA

A New Agency, With More Funding and Authority, Would Be Built in Homeland Security Department

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By [Spencer S. Hsu](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, April 27, 2006; Page A03

Hurricane Katrina exposed flaws in the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Department of Homeland Security that are "too substantial to mend," and FEMA should be dismantled and rebuilt inside the troubled department, according to the final report by Senate investigators.

The report, to be released to key senators today and to the public next week, makes 86 recommendations that would undo major changes made when President Bush and Congress launched the department in 2003, and would reverse parts of a reorganization ordered by Secretary Michael Chertoff last summer. It stops short of restoring FEMA to independent, Cabinet-level status, as many in Congress and former agency directors want, but would promote its chief to confer directly with the president in a crisis, according to a summary released to news organizations.

The 800-plus-page report, "Hurricane Katrina: A Nation Still Unprepared," incorporates many findings by earlier House and White House investigations but goes further in recommending structural changes in how all levels of government -- especially the Homeland Security Department -- respond to catastrophes.

It would replace FEMA with a new National Preparedness and Response Authority whose head would report to the secretary but serve as the president's top adviser for national emergency management, akin to the military role served by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It would reunify disaster preparedness and response activities that Chertoff decoupled, and restore grant-making authority taken away by Congress in redefining a stronger national preparedness system with regional coordinators, a larger role for the National Guard and the Defense Department and more money for training, planning and exercises.

"We have concluded that FEMA is in shambles and beyond repair, and that it should be abolished," Chairman Susan Collins (R-Maine) said in a written statement released by the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, which held 22 hearings, interviewed more than 320 people and reviewed more than 838,000 pages of documents.

The report by the 16-member panel formally kicks off a frenzied effort by

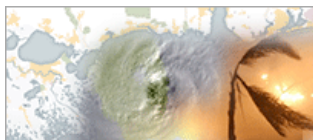
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Katrina's devastation in News Orleans surrounds workers rebuilding levees Tuesday. Leaders hope the levees, and the U.S. response system, are ready for the next hurricane season. (By Mario Tama -- Getty Images)

VIDEO | Sen. Panel Recommends Nixing FEMA

COVERAGE OF THE STORMS



A Devastating Season

The Gulf Coast was hit hard by two massive hurricanes in the fall of 2005.



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Congress to make fixes before the June 1 start of hurricane season. By framing the debate around FEMA's fate, the report defers to President Bush's request to not carve it out of the Homeland Security Department even as it faults his administration, among 24 findings, for failing to fund and coordinate disaster readiness efforts after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and for emphasizing terrorism at the expense of natural disaster preparedness. The administration was also faulted for bungling the storm response by neglecting warnings, failing to grasp Katrina's destructiveness, doing too little or taking the wrong steps before the Aug. 29 landfall. The report also found design flaws in New Orleans levees and failures by city and state leaders.

The Senate report said making FEMA independent would "do nothing to solve the key problems that Katrina has revealed, including a lack of resources and weak and ineffective leadership," and could lead to wasteful duplication.

The Senate report is the only bipartisan national inquiry into the storm, which killed 1,330 people, displaced 1 million families, swamped 80 percent of New Orleans and led to a \$100 billion federal response. House Democrats boycotted their chamber's effort, fearing a partisan whitewash, and called for an independent panel styled after the one that investigated the Sept. 11 attacks. Afterward, several Democrats said its findings were complete, but should have called for Chertoff's removal.

Yesterday, the ranking Democrat on Collins's committee, Joseph I. Lieberman (Conn.) added a written statement excoriating Bush and his aides for being "surprisingly detached" before and just after the storm and for not cooperating with Senate investigators, who he said should have subpoenaed the White House.

"The President failed to provide critical leadership when it was most needed, and that contributed to a grossly ineffective federal response to Hurricane Katrina," Lieberman said.

As Bush headed to the Gulf Coast today, White House spokesman Scott McClellan reiterated the administration's stance to keep FEMA "where it is."

Rep. David G. Reichert (R-Wash.), who chairs a House Homeland Security subcommittee, has proposed reuniting disaster preparedness and response functions within FEMA, which Chertoff split up in a reorganization of the Homeland Security Department. A bipartisan group of committee leaders warned April 12 that "removing FEMA from DHS would only exacerbate the agency's problems" with hurricane season starting June 1.

But Rep. William Shuster (R-Pa.), chairman of a House Transportation and Infrastructure subcommittee, would make FEMA independent, as would Rep. Thomas M. Davis III (R-Va.), head of the Government Reform Committee.

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