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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-2404

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Mr. R. David Paulison
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
Department of Homeland Security
500 C Street, SW
Washington, DC 20472

Dear Mr. Paulison:

I am writing to urge you to reconsider your recent decision to abandon responsibility for supplying ice to disaster victims after a hurricane.

This decision is very troublesome in two ways. First, it is highly insulting to millions of residents of coastal states who have experienced major hurricanes when the agency in charge of the federal response says that ice is a luxury rather than a necessity. Anyone who spent any time in the hardest-hit areas of Mississippi or Louisiana after Katrina would know that ice was essential until utility services were restored, stores were reopened and resupplied, and gasoline was available for those who still had cars. This decision must have been made by those who were comfortably up at FEMA headquarters.

Second, this decision confirms my suspicion that FEMA has learned nothing from the failures of the Katrina response and relief effort. FEMA appears to be governed by a bureaucratic culture that looks for excuses to deny assistance. FEMA's role at the head of the federal government's disaster response requires a problem-solving, mission-oriented emphasis in order to succeed. The system simply will not work if FEMA is more concerned with avoiding responsibility than with providing guidance and assistance.

I had hoped that the out-of-touch and insulting position on ice deliveries had followed Michal Brown out the door. I had this exchange with Brown at a Congressional hearing on September 27, 2005, almost one month after Hurricane Katrina:

BROWN: I think it's wrong for the federal government to be in the ice business, providing ice so I can keep my beer and Diet Coke cool.

TAYLOR: How about the need to keep bodies from rotting in the sun?

Ice was needed to preserve bodies until a refrigerator truck arrived two days later, but ice also was needed to save lives and to provide comfort. I can assure you that thousands of people would not stand in line for hours in the August heat if they did not

need ice or if it were available for purchase nearby. Many people whose names will not appear on an official list of emergency medical needs will experience severe difficulties after days of 100° temperatures. More than a week after the storm, my offices were still directing medical responders to check on elderly residents suffering from the effects of the heat. Their family members had called my Washington, DC office when they could not reach local officials by phone.

Coastal residents know how to prepare for the loss of electricity after a storm. We stock up on nonperishable foods. We fill jugs with water to drink and fill bathtubs for water to flush toilets. We freeze water to have ice to try to salvage the contents of our refrigerators and to thaw the contents of our freezers in an effort to take care of ourselves for as long as possible. Sometimes, all those preparations are for naught.


When I traveled by boat to check on my house on the afternoon of August 29, 2005, the house was not there. My neighbors' houses were not there. When I made it to the Hancock County Emergency Operations Center, I found that the city and county buildings had been destroyed or heavily damaged, their vehicles and other equipment were unusable, their emergency other supplies were damaged, and the first responders themselves had resorted to police-sanctioned looting to get food and dry clothing from the damaged Wal-Mart and several local grocery stores.

FEMA should be prepared to deliver food, water, and ice to the disaster area as soon as possible. Your new policy to delegate responsibility for ice to local and state governments would add layers of complexity, bureaucracy, and delay to what should be a simple and straightforward task. There was a total failure of communication after Katrina, and with it, a break down in every aspect of the response that required local governments to coordinate with FEMA or to seek approval for eventual reimbursement.

If FEMA understands only one lesson from Katrina, it should be that you cannot sit back and wait for local governments to request assistance when they have been obviously overwhelmed by a major catastrophe. In future disasters, I urge you to make sure that FEMA personnel are in the disaster area as quickly as possible with the authority to assess the needs of the community and to take action to help meet those needs. Do not lock in procedures that rely on layers of communication and coordination.

Thank you for your attention to this request. If I can be of any assistance in this matter, please do not hesitate to ask.

Sincerely,



GENE TAYLOR
Member of Congress

GT:jbm