



Highlights of [GAO-06-442T](#), a testimony before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee

Why GAO Did This Study

The size and strength of Hurricane Katrina resulted in one of the largest natural disasters in our nation's history. Hurricane Katrina raised major questions about our nation's readiness and ability to respond to catastrophic disasters. Hurricane Rita increased demands on an already stressed response and recovery effort by all levels of government. The two hurricanes provided a sobering picture of the overwhelming strains on response and recovery if there are back-to-back catastrophic disasters in the same area. GAO has a large body of ongoing work on a range of issues relating to all phases of the preparation, response, recovery, and rebuilding efforts related to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

What GAO Recommends

Today, we are making several recommendations to help reform the nation's emergency preparedness, response, and recovery system. For example, these include clarifying the roles and responsibilities of key federal officials, clarifying various aspects of the National Response Plan, and strengthening planning and response capabilities.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-442T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Norman J. Rabkin at (202) 512-8777 or rabkinn@gao.gov.

HURRICANE KATRINA:

GAO's Preliminary Observations Regarding Preparedness, Response, and Recovery

What GAO Found

Significant government and private resources were mobilized to respond to the hurricanes. However, these capabilities were clearly overwhelmed and there was widespread dissatisfaction with the results. Many of the lessons emerging from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are similar to those we identified more than a decade ago, in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in 1992, which leveled much of South Florida. Four major issues have emerged from our preliminary work:

- The preparation and response to Hurricane Katrina are similar to lessons learned from past catastrophic disasters. These include the critical importance of (1) clearly defining and communicating leadership roles, responsibilities, and lines of authority for catastrophic response in advance of such events, (2) clarifying the procedures for activating the National Response Plan and applying them to emerging catastrophic disasters, (3) conducting strong advance planning and robust training and exercise programs, and (4) strengthening response and recovery capabilities for a catastrophic disaster.
- A risk management decision making approach is vital to develop the nation's capabilities and expertise to respond to a catastrophic disaster. Given the likely costs, Congress should consider using such an approach in deciding how best to invest in specific capabilities for a catastrophic disaster.
- Because of FEMA's mission performance during Hurricane Katrina, concerns have been raised regarding the agency's organizational placement, including whether it should be disbanded and functions moved to other agencies, remain within the Department of Homeland Security, or become an independent agency. However, other factors such as leadership and resources may be more important to FEMA's future success than organizational placement.
- Lastly, the federal government will be a major partner in the longer-term rebuilding of the Gulf Coast, supporting state and local efforts. The federal role in rebuilding will be particularly important for transportation and health infrastructures and federal facilities. In addition, federal programs will face financial difficulties and there is uncertainty about catastrophic losses affecting the availability and affordability of insurance. Long term rebuilding raises issues concerning the need for consensus on what rebuilding should be done, who will pay for what, and what oversight is needed to ensure federal funds are spent for their intended purposes.