

**Keynote Address to the Weather Channel Forum:  
Policy Issues in Hurricane Preparedness and Response**

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I bring you greetings from President Clinton and Vice President Gore. I want to thank you for the opportunity to join you to discuss how America deals with hurricanes. And thanks, first and foremost, to the Weather Channel for helping Americans to survive hurricanes by arming them with the most important weapon of all: information.

The Weather Channel and FEMA have been partners for a long time. The Weather Channel was one of the first media organizations to work with the emergency management community to educate the public about hurricane watches and warnings.

They pioneered the use of cable to inform people about decisions on evacuations storm alerts and other information critical to the safety of their viewers.

This meeting is another example of the leadership in media responsibility that we have come to expect from the Weather Channel.

To further our partnership, I am pleased to announce that FEMA will be signing an official Memorandum of Understanding together in the coming days.

So there were many reasons why I wanted to be at this forum today but an important one was to recognize the people of the Weather channel for their leadership and support to the American public.

The last five hurricane seasons have been the most active on record. This year's is forecasted to continue this trend of fierce and frequent storms.

The last major period of increased hurricane activity was between 1940 and 1960. Since then, the population of hurricane-prone areas has doubled or tripled. One out of every five people in the United States is now at direct risk every year. In the 1990's over 2.5 million people relocated to the Southeast.

Right now, those millions of people are anxiously watching images produced from satellites high above. They are monitoring activity in the Atlantic. They are watching the Weather Channel in anxious anticipation.

And my message to you today is simple. There is another place, just as important they need to look.

We must all monitor the approach of storms, of course. But in addition to the sky or the sea, Americans must also look to their own homes -- to their neighborhoods -- and to their communities. The devastation of the next storm will not be decided in the weeks in which it cranks across the ocean or the days in which it pounds our shores.

The impact of the next hurricane is being decided right now -- in the days, weeks and months of preparation that are required to make communities resistant to disaster.

The impact of the next hurricane is being decided right now -- when we preserve a coastline, or pump more greenhouse gases into the air ... when we build in a flood plain, or plan communities thoughtfully ... when we put up shoddy homes, or enact strong building codes.

Hurricane season lasts a few months. But disaster resistance must be a priority year-round.

At FEMA, we're working to ensure we can respond quickly and capably to any storm. But we're also working to prepare for damage before that storm hits. The focus of that effort is Project Impact: Building a Disaster-Resistant Community, FEMA's initiative to make whole communities resistant to disasters.

Long before hurricanes strike, we are encouraging jurisdictions to enact strong building codes. We're discouraging development along coastlines and flood plains that both puts families at risk and erodes natural barriers to storms.

Prevention efforts must recognize that the danger of hurricanes isn't just saltwater surging over the shoreline. It's freshwater flooding inland -- which is responsible for more than half the deaths in tropical cyclones in the United States.

The danger isn't just howling winds. It's the debris those winds shoot through the air.

That's why we're working with engineers to develop safe rooms that provide protection from wind and debris. We've partnered with companies that install shatter-proof windows in hurricane-prone structures.

Those are measures we can take long before storms strike.

FEMA and the Weather Channel are working together to educate people about prevention and Project Impact.

And education is so very important.

Recently, FEMA took a poll in the hurricane prone- states. The poll revealed a wide spread perception that hurricane prevention measures were too expensive.

However, when we informed individuals of what they could do and how much these measures actually cost, more than half of all homeowners said they would spend \$2-3 thousand dollars if it would reduce their risks.

And we know that education pays off.

Under a Project Impact partnership with Fannie Mae Corporation, Crown Bank in Florida is offering low cost loans for prevention measures. In only six weeks, they have issued more than a million dollars in loans.

As we enter this hurricane season, the message of prevention must be our first priority.

But we know that there are other issues that must be addressed and that is why we are here today.

We know that accurate information is essential for decision making on warnings, transportation routes and sheltering plans.

How we communicate this information to the decision makers and then to the public is Equally critical.

Our experience in Hurricane Floyd made us realize we need to refine how we approach these issues.

Floyd was the largest peacetime evacuation.

As a result of massive public response, huge out of county and out of State evacuees and multiple States evacuating on to a limited road network, traffic congestion reached unacceptable levels.

The good news was that hundreds of thousands of people in several states responded to evacuation orders. And they responded because they listened to their local officials, local TV meteorologists and the Weather Channel.

The bad news was that their response -- which turned into the largest evacuation in American history -- overwhelmed transportation infrastructure in four states.

In response, FEMA along with the Department of Transportation, commissioned a study of hurricane evacuation traffic in the Southeast United States.

We reached a few conclusions. Better coordination between state and federal authorities on reverse lane standards and other issues is a must.

Alternative routes must be utilized. We need better technology for better communication.

Hurricanes Floyd and Irene also showed unmet needs in the areas of storm surge mapping, evacuation zones and timetables, sheltering arrangements and predictive models.

For this hurricane season, we are implementing some of the lessons we learned.

Working with our State and local partners and Federal Highway Administration, we have developed a new model that will allow States to plan and assess the impact of multi-county or multi-State evacuations on their road systems and design alternatives.

We will be working together to establish evacuation liaison teams that will bring the expertise of the State transportation planners, the emergency managers and the decision makers together at the most critical time.

Our goal is to correct the problem and then apply the solution to all hurricane prone areas.

Our other goal is to reassure the public that we saw the problem in Floyd and we are doing something to prevent it from happening again.

It is so very important that we not erode the trust the American people have in us during times of disaster.

Let me close with one final thought.

Just as we can't ignore the impact of human decisions on the damage caused by hurricanes, neither should we ignore the impact of human decisions on storms themselves.

It is scientific fact -- proven over and over and over again -- that global climate change is fueling the rise in weather events. It is scientific fact that the erosion of coastlines is allowing storm surge to travel further inland, and with more force.

Ignoring this evidence invites devastation. After all, if we fail to protect nature, how can we expect it to protect us?

This hurricane season may be the most intense on record. I promise you FEMA will monitor it closely and respond to it quickly.

But I can make another promise with equal certainty. The impact of the next hurricane is being decided right now ... in living rooms, city council chambers and communities across America.

Let's spend this hurricane season watching the skies and monitoring the seas. But let's also agree to act now -- right now -- while the skies are blue and the seas are calm -- to prepare for the next hurricane long before it strikes.