

**STATEMENT OF
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**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP
AND THE
AD HOC SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISASTER RECOVERY
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE**

**A YEAR LATER: LESSONS LEARNED, PROGRESS MADE, AND
CHALLENGES THAT REMAIN FROM HURRICANE IKE**

SEPTEMBER 25, 2009

Chairman Landrieu and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) assistance to the State of Texas to rebuild and recover from the damaging effects of Hurricane Ike. FHWA has been working very closely with the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) to provide emergency relief support for damage from Hurricane Ike to Federal-aid eligible highways.

Over a year ago, Hurricane Ike caused extensive damage as it made landfall along the north end of Galveston Island, and traveled through Galveston Bay east of Houston, and then northward across eastern Texas. Even before the storm struck, FHWA began working closely with TxDOT and our Federal emergency relief partners. We continued to provide emergency relief during and immediately after Hurricane Ike struck. The United States Department of Transportation (DOT) and FHWA remain firmly committed to continue helping the ravaged areas recover as quickly as possible. Today, I would like to share with you some of the details related to our response.

FHWA PRE-HURRICANE ACTIVITIES

FHWA is well positioned to respond proactively and rapidly to hurricane warnings in order to help minimize the damaging effects. We have a Division Office in each State that works closely with State and local highway officials on a routine basis. The long-standing history of collaboration between FHWA's Texas Division Office and TxDOT that predated Hurricane Ike provided an excellent foundation for a coordinated and timely FHWA response to the hurricane disaster. Before Hurricane Ike made landfall in Texas, our Division Office provided advice to State and local jurisdictions concerning Emergency Relief program eligibility and engineering and contracting issues, and shared lessons learned from prior emergency situations. In addition, DOT dispatched a member

of the Evacuation Liaison Team, managed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), to Austin in advance of Hurricane Ike's arrival to provide technical advice in the event that Texas needed help with an evacuation.

FHWA utilizes several emergency preparedness activities to help diminish the impacts of natural disasters on highway infrastructure. For example, each Division Office trains emergency coordinators, who collect information during emergency situations. This information provides situational awareness and information regarding the status of the roadway networks. FHWA's emergency coordinators report this information to FHWA headquarters staff, who then share the information with the DOT Crisis Management Center.

Further, the Emergency Transportation Operations team, within FHWA's Office of Operations, provides tools, guidance, capacity building, and good practices that aid local and State DOTs and their partners in their efforts to improve transportation network efficiency and safety when a non-recurring event either interrupts or overwhelms transportation operations. As part of its mission, our Emergency Transportation Operations team routinely works with State, local, and tribal governments to improve their disaster-specific transportation planning and operations, including evacuation management. The team has also conducted four regional workshops on Evacuation Planning since 2007. The first workshop included the Gulf States, with participants focusing on a hypothetical scenario involving a hurricane event that causes evacuations.

Since 2006, FHWA has produced numerous publications to address evacuation planning and operations during events with notice and events with no notice, including evacuating populations with special mobility needs. FHWA's Office of Policy coordinated the Department-wide production of the report required by section 10204 of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users, "*Catastrophic Evacuation Plan Evaluation: A Report to Congress.*" FHWA's Office of Operations played a significant role in the development of the report by serving as FHWA's technical expert and collaborating with experts from DOT's Office of the Secretary, the Federal Transit Administration, the Federal Railroad Administration, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, and the Maritime Administration. Furthermore, FHWA coordinated the content of the report with the Department of Homeland Security, which was undertaking a parallel effort, the *National Plan Review*, to address similar assessments of emergency plans nationwide. FHWA's Office of Operations published and distributed the final report, supplied the report to all of the Division Offices, and asked them to share it with their State partners.

FHWA RESPONSE AFTER HURRICANE IKE

As soon as it was safe and practicable to do so, FHWA deployed personnel to the affected areas to work alongside State and local highway officials to assess the damage and to facilitate response and recovery efforts.

In the months after the hurricane, the Texas Division Office conducted three workshops on FHWA's Emergency Relief Program and claims process for joint FHWA and State damage assessment teams. These training sessions, which were held on October 29 in Beaumont, November 5 in Houston, and November 6 in Tyler, increased the efficiency with which Emergency Relief program qualification decisions were made.

The Emergency Relief Program, authorized under section 125 of title 23, United States Code, reimburses States for expenses related to highway infrastructure damage associated with natural disasters and other emergency situations, such as Hurricane Ike. This program supplements the commitment of resources by States, their political subdivisions, or other Federal agencies to help pay for unusually heavy expenses resulting from extraordinary conditions. Examples of the type of work eligible for Emergency Relief program reimbursement include repairing pavements, shoulders, slopes, embankments, guard rails, signs, traffic control devices, and bridges, and removing debris from the highway rights-of-way. Reimbursement under the Emergency Relief Program is for the repair and restoration of highway facilities to pre-disaster conditions. However, most activities related to new construction to increase capacity, correct non-disaster related deficiencies, or otherwise improve highway facilities are not eligible for Emergency Relief Program funding. Generally, FHWA cannot pay for betterments unless they can be economically justified. Furthermore, while FHWA can fund repairs to a damaged bridge built to current design standards, we cannot pay for repair of a deficient bridge that was damaged by a disaster.

Eligible repairs under the Emergency Relief Program are classified into two major categories: emergency repairs and permanent repairs. Emergency repairs are those repairs needed to restore essential traffic, minimize the extent of damage, or protect the remaining facilities. Emergency repairs can begin immediately following a disaster and do not require prior FHWA approval. Properly documented costs are later reimbursed after FHWA finds that the disaster is eligible for emergency relief funding. Permanent repairs are those repairs that permanently restore the highway to its pre-disaster condition. Permanent repairs require prior FHWA approval and authorization.

FHWA has made down payments to the State of Texas for emergency relief. We provided Texas with \$2 million of "quick release" emergency repair funds for dredging of the vehicle ferry channel between Galveston Island and the Bolivar Peninsula.

In addition to the immediate infusion of funds for emergency repairs, FHWA is continuing to process reimbursement claims for permanent repairs. On September 16, 2008, TxDOT informed the FHWA Texas Division Office that TxDOT intended to claim \$70 million in emergency relief damages pursuant to the Emergency Relief program. FHWA subsequently allocated \$70 million in emergency relief funds for TxDOT. As of September 17, 2009, TxDOT has submitted \$73.4 million in emergency relief claims covering 38 counties. FHWA determined approximately \$21,000 to be ineligible but has approved \$63.9 million as eligible for reimbursement, and is reviewing the remaining \$9.4 million in emergency relief claims. We expect this review to be completed in the

next few weeks. Additionally, fifteen local government agencies have submitted claims—fourteen within the Houston District and one within the Beaumont District.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which President Obama signed into law on February, 17, 2009, is also providing resources to this area to repair damage caused by Hurricane Ike. Construction has begun on a project on State Highway 87 in Galveston County using approximately \$6.17 million in Recovery Act funds for new pavement and raise the roadway elevation for better flood protection.

To ensure quality assistance and rapid recovery, FHWA is also involved in inter-agency coordination. For example, FHWA coordinated with FEMA, TxDOT, and the Galveston County Navigational District #1 (GCND) to repair the Pelican Island Causeway Lift Bridge. On March 25, 2009, FHWA participated in a meeting with FEMA, TxDOT, and GCND to discuss the repair needs for the bridge and whether the work was eligible for reimbursement under the Emergency Relief Program. On June 15, 2009, GCND submitted an initial claim of \$4.2 million, and on June 22, FHWA approved the claim. To date, FEMA has reimbursed GCND for approximately \$356,000 for the initial repairs. FHWA has reimbursed GCND for \$1.55 million for initial and permanent repairs. Contracts for remaining permanent repairs, including a fender system update, are being finalized. The estimate for this remaining work is approximately \$2.5 million, and FHWA has already approved the work as eligible for reimbursement under the Emergency Relief Program.

TxDOT has informed FHWA that it intends to submit additional claims, and the FHWA Texas Division Office is prepared to ask FHWA headquarters to allocate additional emergency recovery funds, once the additional claims have been received and deemed eligible.

FUTURE PREVENTATIVE ACTIONS

FHWA is continually striving to improve its coordination and the assistance that it provides to State, local, and tribal governments. Based upon our experience from Hurricane Ike, FHWA has begun coordinating additional studies that will lead to more effective debris clearance in the field since State DOTs and Public Works Departments work very closely at the local levels on debris clearance following natural or man-made incidents. The Office of Operations also worked with the Transportation Research Board's National Cooperative Highway Research Program to commission a study of debris clearance following a disaster and the role of transportation in disaster relief efforts. This study will commence in 2010.

In addition, FHWA is finalizing a two-volume report on the use of evacuation models. This report will provide information to State and local governments on how to select appropriate model platforms for their needs. The Office of Operations will soon produce online training on evacuation planning and operations that will be available to all stakeholders. FHWA will also incorporate a unit on evacuation planning and operations

in its Traffic Incident Management workshops that will be held in the top 40 metropolitan areas over the next three years.

CONCLUSION

FHWA continues to seek opportunities to educate practitioners regarding conducting effective evacuations, debris clearance, alternate routing, or other transportation planning and operations practices. We are making progress in repairing the transportation systems destroyed by Hurricane Ike, but work remains. We will continue to work with our State and Federal partners to ensure that highway recovery efforts are completed quickly and in a fiscally responsible manner, and we look forward to continuing our efforts to assist the citizens of Texas.

Madame Chairman, thank you again for this opportunity to testify. I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

Biography of Achille (Al) Alonzi

Achille (Al) Alonzi is the Assistant Division Administrator for the Federal Highway Administration Texas Division Office in Austin. Al oversees the day-to-day operations of the Texas Division Office, which provides front line Federal-aid program delivery assistance to the State of Texas and works to ensure that program delivery and stewardship activities are consistent with Federal-aid requirements.

Al joined the FHWA in 1990. Prior to becoming Assistant Division Administrator, Al was the Affiliate Programs Team Leader in the FHWA Office of Professional and Corporate Development in Washington, DC. He also held a number of field positions at the Kentucky and Connecticut Division Offices, as well the former Regional Office in Albany, NY.

Al received a Bachelor of Sciences in Civil Engineering from Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Worcester, Massachusetts, and is a graduate of the AASHTO National Transportation Leadership Institute. He is married and has a 5 year old son and a 3 year old daughter.