

This past week, we observed the one year anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11. Across the state and across the nation, Americans stopped to reflect and remember.

As part of our response to the attacks and our efforts to prepare for any future threats, we have taken aggressive measures here at home to ensure the safety and security of our people.

Those measures have taken several different forms.

In the weeks immediately after the attacks, we called together representatives from the State Department of Health, the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency, the Department of Public Safety, the Department of Environmental Quality, the Mississippi Highway Patrol, the FBI and the U.S. Postal Service.

In less than eight hours, they had developed a protocol for law enforcement and emergency agencies to use when handling biological and chemical threats.

An FBI agent at the meeting commented that we were the first state in the nation to accomplish this effort.

Mississippi is one of only three states in the nation with a specific standard Incident Management System for emergency responders. Under this system, law enforcement agencies, fire departments and other emergency agencies would operate under a common system to ensure open communication and the quickest response.

In November 2001, a Domestic Preparedness Summit brought together emergency responders from around the state to discuss more ways in which they could work together. One of the results of this summit was the expansion of our existing Terrorism

Task Force to a full Homeland Security Council and the development of a state Homeland Security Strategic Plan.

In December, a meeting with Governor Tom Ridge, the Director of Homeland Security, offered an opportunity for me to discuss the steps we had already taken and share ideas with other governors.

At this time, we are continuing to conduct regional bioterrorism exercises around the state to improve the coordination and cooperation between local governments.

And, the thousands of men and women who serve in our National Guard and active military are fighting in the war against terrorism, here at home and around the world.

At the national level, a Homeland Security Advisory System was created. Set up with five different color-coded threat levels, this system offers the general public a quick idea of the nation's alert status.

This past week, the threat level was increased from elevated (yellow) to high (orange). The change occurred because of specific information about potential terrorist activities around the world.

Here at home, the change in threat levels should not be cause for panic, but should remind us to simply be more aware of things happening around us and take a few more precautions in our daily routine.

Mississippi's Homeland Security website offers a wealth of information regarding state and national efforts to protect our citizens. The address for the website is www.homelandsecurityms.gov, and it's a resource that should be referred to on a regular basis.

We are one year removed from the worst attacks in the history of our nation, but we are also more prepared than we have ever been to face any challenges to the safety and security of the people of Mississippi.