

Governor's Column – 12/02/01

Weather Gives Its Worst, Brings Out Our Best

The news footage Saturday morning after Thanksgiving told the entire story. Roofs ripped from homes, debris scattered for miles, cars twisted and turned and thrown hundreds of yards. It was the work of a massive tornado, and the damage was horrible.

Mississippi has had “more than its fair share” of natural disasters this year. Joe Allbaugh, Executive Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, said that to me on the phone this past week, and he was right.

I spoke with Allbaugh regarding our request for federal disaster assistance, and I pressed the need for him to do everything possible to make it happen. After the year we've had, we need some help.

In this calendar year alone, we have had three federal declarations for tornadoes and flooding. In February, tornadoes ripped across north Mississippi destroying homes and lives. In June, Tropical Storm Allison flooded 500 homes on the Gulf Coast. Over the Thanksgiving holiday, tornadoes swept across nine Mississippi counties. Yes, we have had more than our fair share.

The damage from this past weekend was unimaginable. Almost 150 homes and businesses completely destroyed, and another 451 damaged. Those homes and businesses can be rebuilt, and that process is already underway.

Sadly, five people lost their lives and 112 were injured. Our thoughts and prayers are with those families.

I went out and toured the affected areas after the storms passed through. It is difficult to describe the magnitude of the damage – a van left looking like a crumpled piece of aluminum foil; a section of sheet metal from a building wrapped around a fire hydrant; bare foundations where new homes once stood.

Within a short time after the storms, I issued a state of emergency for the nine counties hit by the bad weather. The Mississippi Emergency Management Agency responded quickly to the needs of those communities. Law enforcement and rescue personnel were on the scene controlling traffic and helping the injured. Red Cross and Salvation Army volunteers offered food and shelter.

In the midst of the recovery efforts, we are facing new challenges.

As I write this, more storms are pounding the state and making clean-up operations even more difficult for those affected by last weekend's storms. More homes are flooding around the state, and another family is mourning the loss of a loved one due to weather. The resources of our emergency operations agencies, already strained by the attacks of September 11, are being tested even more with these natural disasters.

I am always proud of how we as Mississippians and Americans rise to the occasions before us. Whether it is a terrorist attack or a natural disaster, we come to the aid and assistance of those who need it most. This is true not just for individuals and organizations, but for government as well.

It is the responsibility of government to respond quickly and effectively to those events that affect the people. We are fortunate to have committed and dedicated individuals working for the state who oversee our response and recovery. These professionals help make difficult situations easier to face and overcome.

In the end, though, it is the bond between neighbors, families and communities that holds us all together. Whether helping a neighbor sift through the rubble, bringing a stranger a sandwich and a cup of coffee, or providing clothes and cash for relief efforts, we all have a role to play.

Yes, we've had more than our fair share this year, but we're going to be all right.