

*Remarks for the
Pearl River Emergency Management Services Banquet
November 2, 2002*

(recognize Robert Latham)

It is great to be here with you tonight. I want to thank Bobby Strahan, not only for the invitation to come down for this banquet, but for his leadership and good work in recent weeks. It's been a busy time for Pearl River County, and Bobby, I appreciate all the hard work you and your staff have done during that time.

And I want to express my thanks to each of you here – as law enforcement officials, as firefighters and EMT's, as the emergency responders for this county – for the commitment you bring to your work and the people you protect.

The past year has changed so much of how we think of emergency responders and, in a deeper sense, our emergency preparedness. The attacks of September 11 hit us blindly. We were caught by surprise in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania.

We just weren't ready for what hit us.

Emergency responders in New York and Washington – firefighters, police officers and others – sacrificed their lives trying to save others. I don't think we'll ever forget the images of that day, of the firefighters running into buildings that thousands of people were running from, of the police officers trying to maintain control in an uncontrollable situation.

I traveled to New York and Washington with a group of governors and the mayor of Washington at the end of September. We went not to see the destruction, but to let our friends in those cities know that we stood with them.

In New York, the sight of American flags hanging from balconies, windows and poles reminded me of the spirit we had been seeing around the world and here at home – a spirit of patriotism, of unity, and commitment to the principles on which our great country stands.

We spent time in restaurants, stores, and theater district of New York, in an effort to encourage people to get back to the normal pace of life.

We bought much needed socks and t-shirts for rescue workers who haven't had the time to go home and change, much less do any laundry.

We gave them to New York Governor George Pataki, who made sure they made it to those in need.

We also met with the members of Ladder Company 3 on East 13th Street, a fire station that lost twelve good men on September 11. I was struck by their genuine gratitude for our brief visit and their desire to share their thoughts, even as a pile of ash-covered boots lay off to one side as a reminder of what had happened.

In Washington, we stood no more than 50 yards from the impact site at the Pentagon. As an Army officer briefed us on the details of the attack, I couldn't take my eyes off the building.

Pictures still hung on walls in what used to be offices. Windows sagged and bulged, the glass melted and reshaped by the intense heat. The concrete walls were black with soot and ash. It was an ugly and sobering sight.

Listening to the description of the flight path of the plane and the damage to the building, I could only think of what an unreal moment it must have been. And, I thought of two Mississippians – James “Joe” Ferguson and Lieutenant Colonel Jerry “D. D.” Dickerson – both from Durant, both killed at the Pentagon. Joe Ferguson was on American Flight 77; Lt. Col. Dickerson was in the building.

Back at home, we focused on the horror of what had happened in cities a thousand miles away. We tried to understand exactly what had happened and what could still happen. We all knew there was a need for a plan of action for future threats.

The effort to pull that plan together moved quickly. On October 15th, law enforcement and public safety agencies sat down in a room. By the end of the day, an agreement was reached on responses to future threats.

Knowing how government works sometimes, how likely would you think it would have been to reach an agreement in one day? We had representatives from MEMA, from the State Department of Health, the Department of Public Safety, the Department of Environmental Quality, the State Fire Marshall's Office, the State Fire Academy, the United States Postal Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

Robert Latham will tell you – it was a focused effort.

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.

Another result of that meeting was an executive order I issued, establishing a centralized command and control system for emergency operations. You may remember that one of the frustrating and tragic issues of 9/11 in New York was the fact that firefighters and police officers were operating on different radio systems, making coordination much more difficult.

Under the Incident Command System established by that executive order, all state and local emergency personnel will utilize common terminology, integrated communications, incident action plans, and unified command and management of resources during emergencies.

The ultimate goal is to ensure the most comprehensive, efficient and responsive protection to the people of Mississippi.

We've been building on the work done in that single meeting in October.

Last November 13, we hosted a summit on domestic preparedness, bringing together emergency agencies from around the state.

MEMA has been conducting bioterrorism exercises around the state, with representatives from county and municipal governments joining forces to make sure they're ready for any potential threats.

And, a homeland security website – found at www.homelandsecurityms.gov -- offers citizens the information they need to be prepared for different situations.

We all hope and pray the threats of terrorism remain just that – threats. But, we will be prepared; we will be ready.

There are other threats, though, that also call for preparation. This county knows all too well the havoc that can be brought by mother nature.

Tropical Storm Isidore, Hurricane Lili, and this week's storm hammered this area.

It's because of our respect for those forces that we take action quickly. As Isidore and Lili grew in intensity and proximity to Mississippi, they were closely monitored. MEMA, at every level, worked closely with federal emergency officials and the National Hurricane Center to prepare for the impact of the storms.

In the end, our top priority is the safety and security of the people of Mississippi. To meet that priority, we declared a state of emergency well ahead of the arrival of Isidore and Lili.

I also signed a state of emergency hours after this week's storms ravaged this county.

When a state of emergency is issued, a massive chain of events is put in motion. Local officials are given broader authority to enact emergency measures in their areas. MEMA can deploy their emergency responders to the front lines of the storm in preparation of meeting local needs.

And, the declaration of a state of emergency also automatically puts into place consumer protection measures designed to protect citizens from those who would try to profit from disaster.

The effectiveness of state of emergency declarations would be greatly lessened if we waited until the storms hit Mississippi. Simply put, they would be too little, too late. To save lives, resources must be in place before they are actually needed.

In addition to the state of emergency declarations for Tropical Storm Isidore and Hurricane Lili, executive orders were issued directing the call-up of the Mississippi National Guard.

There is no doubt that the deployment of our “citizen soldiers” during Isidore helped save lives. Guard personnel were out in force evacuating people from flooded areas accessible only by heavy military trucks. In one night, nearly 600 people were removed by the men and women of the Guard.

One photo of a National Guard soldier carrying a 10-month old little boy to safety told the entire story of the work these great soldiers carried out during Tropical Storm Isidore.

In addition to the resources marshaled by the state of emergency declarations and the deployment of Guard personnel, hundreds of emergency management professionals and local volunteers – many of you here tonight – staffed emergency operations centers. The good work you do before, during and after natural disasters cannot be emphasized enough.

There's one other point I want to make here tonight – when it comes to storms like Isidore and Lili, we will not do anything that would put the lives of Mississippians at risk. That same commitment applies to those evacuating from our neighboring states.

Our shelters and our roads are always open to them, but we are not going to implement plans that take away substantial resources from our own communities and put our people at risk.

The issue of reverse-laning, or contraflow, of Interstate 59 is complicated and has suffered from a good bit of misinformation. The truth is, the state of Louisiana doesn't have an evacuation plan of its own in place, and Governor Foster and the head of the Louisiana State Police still have concerns about contraflow.

We're not far from I-59 here tonight, and you can imagine what the impact of tens of thousands of cars and people coming up all four lanes from New Orleans would have on this community.

There are legitimate concerns, and we're addressing those concerns now. Robert Latham is working closely with his counterparts in Louisiana – “partnering” may be a better word – to put together a plan that will work and, more importantly, save lives.

The bottom line is this: Our ability to take on the challenges presented to us – by nature or by man – is enhanced by our level of preparedness for any situation, and we're ready for whatever comes our way.

Thank you for the great work you do for Pearl River County and for Mississippi.