



Report: U.S. Not Ready for Disaster

GAO: Data on post-Katrina progress, spending are lacking

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USA Today, NEWS; Pg. 3A

September 7, 2006

The U.S. isn't prepared to handle disasters and lacks an effective way to track \$88 billion doled out to help rebuild the Gulf Coast after last year's killer hurricanes, according to government reports released Wednesday.

The reports by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), Congress' investigative agency, say that safeguards are not in place to ensure speedy responses to the nation's next catastrophe.

"We are clearly better off than we were five years ago and one year ago, but we are not where we need to be," said GAO Comptroller General David Walker.

Max Stier of the Partnership for Public Service, a non-partisan group that promotes effective government, said that the 9/11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina were "wake-up calls" and that the new GAO reports highlight a "critical need for leadership" in government.

The three reports examine the government's progress in addressing its response after Hurricane Katrina, which hit Aug. 29, 2005, and left more than 1,700 people dead in Louisiana and Mississippi. Among the findings:

- The Homeland Security Department says it has made changes to improve its ability to respond to disasters, "but there is little information available on the extent to which those changes are operational." Responders still don't have the ability to communicate by radio during a crisis.

Department spokesman Russ Knocke said some of Homeland Security's new policies are not made public for security reasons. "There has been a tremendous amount of reflection on what did and didn't work" during the Katrina response, he said.

- The government has no place to collect data on how and where 23 agencies are spending their share of the \$88 billion Congress has allocated for Gulf Coast recovery.

Congress needs to know "how much federal funding has been spent and by whom, whether more may be needed, or whether too much has been provided," the GAO said. Taxpayers and hurricane victims also should be able to find out how the money's being spent, one report said.

- The Army Corps of Engineers is "following a piecemeal approach" to flood prevention. "We are concerned that the Corps is proceeding with over \$7 billion of interim repairs and construction without a comprehensive strategy," the GAO said.

The GAO report also expressed concern about the delays and costs to repair damaged levees. The costs have risen from \$841 million to more than \$1 billion.

The corps "generally" agrees with the GAO, according to a written response from John Paul Woodley, assistant secretary of the Army for civil works. However, Woodley said, the corps is "moving forthright to re-establish lines of defense."