

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
FCC FIELD HEARING
ATLANTA, GEORGIA
SEPTEMBER 15, 2005**

Today, as in all recent days, our thoughts and prayers go out to those whose lives have been upended by Hurricane Katrina and the New Orleans flood. Seeing communities ripped apart by wind and water, watching lives being uprooted and families divided, has made for a difficult two-and-a-half weeks. Our thanks go out to so many of our fellow citizens who have worked, often heroically, to rescue the stranded, heal the hurt and begin the arduous process of rebuilding.

I feel particularly close to this disaster, not only because I used to live in New Orleans, just blocks from where the now notorious levees gave way, but because my wife's family lives in New Orleans and is trying to cope with the devastation that was wrought.

I want to thank Chairman Martin for holding this meeting and commend him for his leadership in the storm's aftermath. I also want to thank the FCC's Dan Gonzalez, Ken Moran and so many other colleagues at the Commission who have worked so tirelessly to aid the recovery effort.

I want to commend our communications industries for their hard work in the wake of the disaster. Executives and their employees are working hundreds of extra hours to restore communications and to provide all sorts of relief and assistance throughout the Gulf Coast area. Last week, Chairman Martin and I saw first-hand some of the Gulf Coast devastation and it etched an indelible memory on me. It was daunting and awful to witness. But there is an even more powerful image that I will always carry with me—and it is seeing the resilience of the human spirit at work. On the coast I met innumerable people left only with the clothes on their backs and the sandals on their feet, and often even these were borrowed or donated. Their houses, all their belongings, often gone. Yet they were throwing themselves into the challenge of recovery, working at their jobs to get communications back up, sacrificing to help others—those with shelter providing it to those without, those with food sharing it with those who had none.

I also saw company leaders who spend much of their time competing against one another pushing their competitive instincts aside and working in a spirit of mutual help. While we all look for good things from the world of inter-modal competition that is beginning to take shape, what we see at work in this emergency operations center right now is inter-modal *cooperation*—traditional wireline, wireless, satellite, radio and television broadcasting, amateur radio, cable, IP technologies and others coming together in the name of disaster recovery. I wish all of them could have been on today's panel. My point is that we need all of them continuing to work together if we are really going to build a Twenty-first century communications infrastructure for New Orleans, the Gulf Coast and the country that provides interoperability, redundancy and synergy among the

advanced telecommunications technologies and services that are becoming available. If we are going to deploy communications that protect against the ravages of nature as well as the murder of terrorism, there is no other way to do it than to combine the efforts of everyone with something to contribute.

Today the Federal Communications Commission takes some promising steps forward. It's been a long time coming—too long. Title I of our enabling statute confers upon the FCC specific national security responsibility to ensure the safety of our people through secure communications networks. I think, and have long said, that the Commission belongs in the vanguard in developing communications solutions for public safety and homeland security. Why? In addition to the legislative obligation I just mentioned, we have the best people and the best expertise in government on communications. I believe we have an obligation to use these expert resources. It's not that the Commission hasn't acted; it's that it hasn't done enough. If Hurricane Katrina was about anything other than nature's wrath, it was about communications. Communications, or the lack thereof, from those stranded in rising waters to loved ones on higher ground; communications, or the lack thereof, among emergency care, law enforcement providers and public safety workers; communications, or the lack thereof, between leaders of our federal, state and local governments; and communications, or the lack thereof, by the media to viewers around the affected area and around the globe.

Last year, *The 9/11 Commission Report* described a state of communications unreadiness that seriously hindered our country's ability to respond to that attack. But it also described a chilling picture of communications unreadiness three years later—and Hurricane Katrina has shown that to be still tragically true. Now people are talking again about the need for full-scale emergency planning. This time we dare not fail.

We have come to Atlanta to ascertain what further actions, both short- and long-term, the FCC can take to improve the reliability, survivability and security of our nation's communications systems. Thank you to today's witnesses—from communications companies, their employees and the public safety community—for enriching our understanding of the communications challenges posed by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. But, in truth, we can only scratch the surface today. In the weeks and months ahead there will be many, many tough questions to answer. We cannot shy away from asking the difficult questions and hunting down the difficult and perhaps unsettling answers.

I am pleased that the Commission is going to establish a blue-ribbon panel to make recommendations to improve disaster preparedness and network reliability. This panel's charter must run both broad and deep. To understand where we need to go, we must understand where we have been, what worked, what didn't. This panel can not only help the Commission and help industry; it can assist Congress, our sister federal agencies, state and local governments, first responders, and the entire public safety, law enforcement and health care provider communities.

I also support the creation of a separate Bureau dedicated specifically to public safety and homeland security. I've talked about this for a long time. In addition to working on specific interoperability and redundancy challenges, this Bureau should serve as convener, facilitator and expeditor, helping local public safety organizations share ideas, prepare plans, vet proposals and coordinate them with both government and industry. Why should every jurisdiction across this broad land have to start at square one when others have already done a lot of work? The coordination challenge is enormous, but we need to have both *strategic* communications among groups charged with emergency response and *tactical* communications among those on the ground during a crisis. Some may call this "pie in the sky," but when we watch search and rescue teams from Virginia, law enforcement officials from Florida, EMS medics from California and countless others selflessly make their way to the Gulf Coast to help, don't we owe them a system that enables them to communicate when they get there?

There is another communications security concern that the Commission needs to address. It is the challenge of integrating our hospitals into the nation's emergency response communications system. My family working in the hospitals of New Orleans in the days after the storm witnessed the horrors that result when hospital communications are not integrated with emergency responders. My nephew, Dr. Rusty Rodriguez, is a resident at Charity Hospital in New Orleans. He lived through experiences no one should have to live through. No food, no water, no power, people suffering, people dying. And, of course, no communications. When he needed to communicate with another hospital down the street, he had to take a boat. That worked—as long as the snipers were taking a break. Rusty came through it all and he's our family hero—but I think maybe we asked too much of Rusty and of all the others who shouldered the terrible burden of caring for the sick in such sickening circumstances. We need to find a way to ensure that our hospitals are part of a reliable emergency communications system that will be able respond, whether it's a hurricane, a terror attack like 9/11, or something else like a bio-terror attack. For starters, the FCC should be a forum for the exchange of ideas and proposals on how to integrate our hospitals into the heart of a working emergency response system so that our doctors and nurses will have interoperable and redundant communications available to them.

These issues compel our attention. We saw the results of communications failures on 9/11. We saw them during the East Coast black-out, and now—again—with Katrina. Maybe this time, at last, we can put our separate resources and talents together to get the job done. In the final analysis, all of us pulling together is the story of our country in times of great challenge. It is what always redeems the promise of America. When the going gets really tough, when challenges threaten our very safety and survival, we come together and work together for the common good. It's how we built this country. It's how we can re-build it in the wake of such calamities as 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina.