

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER JONATHAN S. ADELSTEIN**

Re: Recommendations of the Independent Panel Reviewing the Impact of Hurricane Katrina on Communications Networks; EB Docket No. 06-119; Second Report and Order (FCC) 07-107

Hurricane Katrina and the 2005 hurricane season represented one of the most challenging times our country has seen in recent years. Its memory should serve as ample reminder of the commitment that will be necessary to achieve disaster readiness and preparedness. All aspects of daily life in the Gulf Coast region were severely impacted by the devastation caused by these storms – telecommunications and media services were no exception. With such destruction of our communications infrastructure, Hurricane Katrina demonstrates in stark relief the essential role of communications during emergencies, whether citizens are trying to find out what is happening with their families, officials are trying to disseminate critical information, or emergency personnel are responding to an urgent situation.

The Katrina Panel Report confirmed that our nation’s communications systems and our government’s response capabilities were put to the test, with very mixed results. While our Order today achieves some limited gains, there is still much to be done before we face our next national test.

The Commission can and must play a key role in improving our nation’s disaster preparedness, network reliability, and communications among first responders. Through our Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau, the Commission must take a more active lead in coordinating with state, local and Tribal governments, public safety answering points (PSAPs), and first responders in advance of future disasters; in providing important outreach to our nation’s emergency medical communities; and in working with other federal agencies to ensure that credentialing procedures and other requirements are developed in advance to ensure access by communications workers to affected areas post-disaster. This item sets out several important directives to our staff to meet these worthwhile objectives. These efforts are critical if the Commission is to establish and maintain a position of leadership. Many of these proposed outreach efforts were specifically recommended by the Hurricane Katrina Panel, so I want to extend again my thanks to Nancy Victory and the members of the Panel for investing their time and effort to draw out lessons from this disaster and to better prepare our communities for the future.

Unfortunately, we still have much work remaining to improve the country’s communications preparedness in light of the events of 20 months ago. As the Order and the Hurricane Katrina Panel Report each point out, Hurricane Katrina knocked out more than three million customer phones in the region and more than a thousand cell sites. More than 35 PSAPs were off-line and unable to provide 911 or enhanced 911 services. The Katrina Panel Report identified three main problems that caused the majority of communications network interruptions: flooding; lack of power and/or fuel; and failure of redundant pathways.¹ I am

¹ See Independent Panel Reviewing the Impact of Hurricane Katrina on Communications Networks, *Report and Recommendations to the Federal Communications Commission* (Katrina Panel Report) at 13.

pleased that we were able to improve the item by addressing these concerns through two modest provisions dealing with (1) emergency back-up power requirements, and (2) an obligation on service providers to file 911 analysis reports. These are worthwhile efforts, but they alone will not be sufficient to ensure that our communications systems are ready to handle the high hurdles that disasters can bring.

Indeed, the larger focus of the item is on a series of aspirational objectives for our new Bureau rather than more concrete assurances for our nation's citizens and first responders. For example, one of the key findings in the Katrina Panel Report was the widespread damage caused by unprecedented flooding: "While communications infrastructure had been hardened to prepare against strong winds from a hurricane, the widespread flooding of long duration associated with Katrina destroyed or disabled substantial portions of the communications networks and impeded trained personnel from reaching and operating the facilities."² There may be no silver bullets to address the widespread flooding caused by a disaster such as Hurricane Katrina; yet, this Order does not in itself require any concrete actions to address this very real problem. The Commission needs to initiate a discussion of hardening the network to address flood related issues. While the Order directs the Bureau to encourage the development of voluntary checklists, it still leaves work to be done. Although outreach and voluntary measures can play a critical role, we must continue to push communications providers to go the extra mile to achieve a true level of preparedness. Without firm commitments, can we seriously tell the people of the Gulf Coast region that this Commission has taken all of the necessary steps to ensure that such a communications disaster will never happen again?

Similarly, the Katrina Panel Report analyzed extensively the problem of the failure of redundant pathways and the impact on communications networks throughout the region from the loss of switches, T1s, and other leased lines. "As an example, a major tandem switch in New Orleans was isolated, which meant that no communications from parts of New Orleans to outside the region could occur."³ Once again, the Commission offers little in the way of solutions for a serious network shortfall that may well be present in many other communities. Rather, the item encourages carriers to adopt voluntary readiness checklists based on best practices advanced by the Network Reliability and Interoperability Council (NRIC) and the Media Security and Reliability Council (MSRC), our recently-terminated Federal Advisory Committees. I understand that neither group has met in well over a year, with NRIC VII holding its last meeting on December 16, 2005, just a couple of months after the hurricane season ended. Now that these committees have been replaced with a new combined reliability council, we will need to seek input more regularly if we are going to rely on a system of carrier commitments and best practices to effectuate network reliability changes.

To all of the affected citizens in the Gulf Coast area – and to the many diverse communities at risk for future catastrophic events – we owe an honest assessment of the performance of the telecommunications and media infrastructure during Hurricane Katrina and of our strengths, weaknesses, and commitment to preparedness going forward. Shortly after the storm, I had an opportunity to witness first hand some of the widespread destruction and personal loss in the Gulf Coast and to meet with communications workers and first responders, who

² *Id.*

³ *Id.* at 14.

labored around the clock to restore connectivity to the Gulf Coast, often at great personal sacrifice. It was humbling to see Americans act so selflessly when others are in need, particularly when so many were themselves suffering the loss of homes, communities, or loved ones. We owe them not only deep gratitude but also a serious effort to develop real solutions to address identified weaknesses and holes in the preparation process. While we have made some limited advances in this Order, I believe our work is still far from over.