



**TESTIMONY OF
REAR ADMIRAL PAUL F. THOMAS
COMMANDER, U.S. COAST GUARD EIGHTH DISTRICT**

**ON
“HOUSTON STRONG: HURRICANE HARVEY LESSONS LEARNED AND THE
PATH FORWARD”**

**BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY**

APRIL 9, 2018

Introduction

Good morning Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and distinguished Members of the Committee. It is my pleasure to be here today to discuss the Coast Guard’s preparations for the next Atlantic hurricane season, lessons learned from the 2017 hurricane season, and the demands contingency responses place on the Coast Guard.

First, let me thank you for the outstanding support this committee has given the Coast Guard, especially as it relates to the supplemental funding for hurricane response activities. This critical infusion allows the Service not only to rebuild damaged and destroyed facilities, but also provides the ability to rebuild to modern resiliency standards, ensuring the best chance of withstanding future disasters.

The U.S. Coast Guard is the world’s premier military, multi-mission, maritime service responsible for the safety, security and stewardship of U.S. waters and hundreds of miles seaward. At all times, a military service and branch of the U.S. Armed Forces, a federal law enforcement agency, a regulatory body, a first responder, and a member of the U.S. Intelligence Community, the Coast Guard stands the watch and serves a nation whose economic prosperity and national security are inextricably linked to broad maritime interests.

As the Nation’s maritime first responder, the Coast Guard has unique capabilities, capacity, and authorities that allow it to play a critical role in disaster response. Today I would like to discuss the Coast Guard’s primary missions in disaster response, its strengths, limitations, and some issues that demand our focus as we look toward the 2018 hurricane season.

Primary Missions in Disaster Response

The Coast Guard’s primary missions in domestic disaster response are:

- 1) Saving lives in distress, and ensuring the safety and survivability of its own forces and assets for immediate post-disaster response operations;

- 2) Security and reconstitution of ports, waterways, and critical maritime infrastructure;
- 3) Environmental response operations (oil, chemical and hazardous material); and
- 4) Support to other agencies in a whole-of-government response effort.

Saving lives in distress remains our first priority. During Hurricanes HARVEY, IRMA, MARIA, and NATE, Coast Guard women and men in vessels, aircraft, vehicles, and on foot rescued nearly 12,000 people and over 1,500 pets.

For each of these storms and all natural disasters along our coastline, Coast Guard crews are typically the first federal responders to enter an impacted area, right alongside our state, local, tribal, and territorial responders, to conduct rescues and assess damage. I should note that in an average year, the Coast Guard saves 3,600 lives. The Coast Guard tripled that number during HARVEY alone in a matter of days.

In addition to search and rescue operations, the Coast Guard flows forces into the impacted regions to restore ports and waterways, respond to pollution, provide security and additional law enforcement capability where necessary, and protect offshore petrochemical platforms. Within five weeks, Hurricanes HARVEY, IRMA, MARIA, and NATE impacted over 2,500 miles of shoreline¹. The Coast Guard responded to 1,269 aids to navigation discrepancies, handled 290 pollution cases, and targeted and assessed thousands of grounded vessels, with more than 4,200 removed to date. Coast Guard damage assessment teams were on-scene within hours determining the status of ports and waterways, documenting environmental hazards, assessing the impacts to Coast Guard facilities and capabilities, and leveraging technology, such as the employment of electronic aids to navigation, to facilitate the reopening of key ports and waterways.

The Coast Guard response during the 2017 hurricane season was historic and overwhelmingly successful. However, as an organization dedicated to continuous improvement and increased resiliency the Coast Guard inherently knows there are lessons to be learned, even after a successful contingency response. The Coast Guard has identified several strategic and over one hundred tactical-level lessons learned. The Coast Guard is tracking, and will continue to track, these issues until they have been resolved. The Service is updating policies and plans, improving capabilities, sharing best practices, and working with FEMA and state partners to improve processes. As we approach the start of the Atlantic hurricane season on June 1, 2018, the Coast Guard will conduct fifty-two natural disaster exercises at its District and Sector Commands.

Our Strengths

The Coast Guard has several key strengths that enable quick and effective response to natural disasters. The first of these strengths begins with its people, whose bias for action and adaptability to rapidly changing circumstances and uncertainty never ceases to fill me with pride and admiration.

¹ Using CRS method of Shoreline Measurement: Texas: 367 mi, Louisiana: 397 mi, Florida: 1,350 mi, Puerto Rico: 311 mi, USVI: 117 mi

Coast Guard cutters, aircraft, and boats are built to respond to a variety of missions without the need for any significant reconfiguration. Cutters conducting counter-drug patrols in the Transit Zone can quickly divert to disaster areas to provide command and control, deliver rotary wing air capability from the sea, conduct refueling, and provide forward staging facilities. Coast Guard aircraft that normally perform law enforcement surveillance to thwart transnational maritime criminal activities can be dynamically repositioned and re-tasked to deliver disaster relief supplies, additional responders, and equipment to affected areas.

Additionally, Coast Guard forces are on station at key locations around the Nation, most of them on short-notice recall, which can respond quickly to emergent events. When a major catastrophe occurs or is anticipated, the Service can reposition forces quickly to that area to optimize the response.

The Coast Guard enjoys an agile and decentralized command and control structure, which provides operational commanders the authority to move forces quickly to respond to large contingencies. Two Area Commanders, and their nine subordinate District Commanders, can shift and reallocate forces from one region to another based on levels of risk and anticipated demand for operational capabilities.

The Coast Guard has also developed and regularly exercises Continuity of Operations Plans for relocating command and control functions out of harm's way to strategically advantageous positions to effectively conduct response and recovery operations. During the 2017 hurricanes, seven major shore commands and one District command shifted out of the path of the storms to alternate facilities, resulting in only minor disruptions and no loss of command and control.

In addition to fielding flexible, multi-mission forces and effective command and control systems, the Coast Guard also benefits from a unique mix of broad standing authorities, as well as extensive experience operating within both military and other interagency response organizations.

As a military service, the Coast Guard can be a supported or supporting commander, and its forces are frequently integrated with U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) services in Joint Task Force organizations. The Service regularly provides forces in support of DOD exercises, Combatant Commander contingency plans, and theater security cooperation activities. This routinely exercised relationship develops close cooperation at the service level, enabling Coast Guard and DOD forces to integrate seamlessly during disaster response operations.

In addition to its military role, the Coast Guard routinely works with other federal agencies, state and local governments, non-governmental agencies, and international organizations under its U.S. Code, Title 14 law enforcement and regulatory responsibilities.

The Coast Guard is the Nation's "maritime first responder" and has a leading role in executing the National Response Framework (NRF) for disaster situations. Its personnel are well-trained and experienced in response operations, which make them a sound choice to be designated for key leadership positions in the NRF structure. This ability to operate concurrently in both military Joint Task Force and civilian NRF structures enhances unity of effort during whole-of-government responses across organizations and dramatically improves the effectiveness of disaster response, which makes the Coast Guard a truly unique federal agency.

Our Limitations

Despite the many strengths the Coast Guard brings to disaster response, the Service has limitations that must be considered.

Across the 2017 hurricane response operations, more than 3,000 Coast Guard women and men, and 200 assets or platforms from across the service, from places as far away as Alaska, Hawaii, and Maine responded to save nearly 12,000 citizens in distress. The hurricane response had a significant impact on Coast Guard operations. The Coast Guard is small in comparison to the other Armed Services. With only 40,600 active duty, 7,000 reserve, and 8,500 civilian personnel, responding to a major natural disaster requires balancing risk in other geographic regions and mission areas in order to flow forces and capabilities into the major disaster response.

Residual risk was spread across the Coast Guard, with a keen eye towards meeting minimal mission standards in most, but not all, locations. Given the heavy demand for aviation capabilities following each of the storms, all aviation training was stopped until the later stages of recovery efforts were reached. The level of forces typically allocated to performing counter-drug, fisheries enforcement, and migrant interdiction operations in the Eastern Pacific Ocean, Caribbean Sea, and Florida Straits were reduced as well.

The Service has a limited capacity to respond to prolonged and sequential events. While the Coast Guard is well-positioned for immediate and effective first response, plans to sustain operations and hand-off responsibilities once a crisis has been stabilized are primary considerations for Coast Guard commanders responding to natural disasters. During 2017, the initial hurricane response spanned multiple months, with some response operations continuing today. The Coast Guard endured risk exposure across all eleven missions with service-wide impacts to training, personnel readiness, and maintenance of equipment. To sustain prolonged response operations, the Service had to sacrifice preparedness for the next contingency response. When discussing resiliency, infrastructure and assets immediately come to mind. However, the resiliency of the Coast Guard as an organization is equally critical to mitigating the secondary effects of responding to emergent events. The Coast Guard must be able to meet the needs of the Nation, through a resilient and well-trained workforce, while simultaneously answering the call for help during a disaster.

The age and condition of the Coast Guard's assets is another concern, and is one that the Administration, with the support of Congress, is working hard to improve. As more modern and capable cutters repositioned for hurricane response, the Coast Guard Cutter ALERT, a 48-year-old cutter, held the line in the Eastern Pacific Ocean. The crew performed admirably, including a two-week period as the only cutter operating in the Eastern Pacific.

Issues to Focus on Going Forward

Lastly, there are several areas that will require continued energy and focus in the months and years ahead in order to enhance the Coast Guard's national disaster response capacity and capability.

When the Coast Guard has the opportunity to recapitalize its facilities, it needs to make them more storm-resilient and survivable. In fact, several shore facilities that were rebuilt following

Hurricane IKE suffered minimal damages along the paths of HARVEY and IRMA, a testament to modern building codes and standards.

Continued investment in recapitalizing Coast Guard resources is paramount. The need for modernized assets, such as the Offshore Patrol Cutter and Waterway Commerce Cutters, to replace an aging fleet is highlighted by the National Security Cutter's superior ability to coordinate and communicate with Coast Guard, Department of Defense, and interagency resources during contingency responses.

Investing in the Coast Guard's infrastructure supports its greatest resource: its people. Although the Service deployed approximately 3,000 additional Coast Guard women and men to support response operations, many more Coast Guardsmen from within the impacted areas responded to help those that were displaced and distressed, even as they and their loved ones were also displaced. The Coast Guard had to relocate over 700 Coast Guard members and dependents after their homes were damaged to the point of being uninhabitable.

Many do not realize the residual risk associated with surging resources to an incident. No amount of response capacity and capability will be effective without a foundation of preparedness. Having enough well-trained and properly equipped personnel, the right assets, and adequate contingency infrastructure in place prior to an event is vital to sustained success during a major disaster response, and to the reconstitution of the impacted area. It is too late to train responders, procure new equipment, or find alternate command posts when a hurricane is barreling toward the coast. As has been shown time and again, investment in the Coast Guard pays dividends when they are needed most.

Conclusion

The Coast Guard is well-positioned to respond to natural disasters due to its unique blend of authorities, capabilities, and capacity. Flexible, multi-mission forces and agile command and control systems provide the solid foundation from which we can respond to major catastrophes. When combined with broad authorities and extensive experience operating with diverse partners, the Coast Guard provides a vital service to our Nation. As an organization that strives to better serve the Nation through continual improvement, the Coast Guard evaluates its successes and failures to optimize performance through applying both strategic and tactical-level lessons learned. The Coast Guard's dedication to ongoing self-improvement will ensure that it is best positioned to deliver the level of service the Nation expects and deserves well into the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and for your ongoing support of the men and women of the Coast Guard. I look forward to your questions.