



**TESTIMONY OF  
VICE ADMIRAL KARL L. SCHULTZ  
COMMANDER, U. S. COAST GUARD ATLANTIC AREA**

**ON  
“EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND RECOVERY: CENTRAL TAKEAWAYS FROM THE  
UNPRECEDENTED 2017 HURRICANE SEASON”**

**BEFORE THE  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE**

**NOVEMBER 2, 2017**

**Introduction**

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today as we discuss the role of the Federal Government and the Coast Guard’s response to the 2017 hurricanes. The Coast Guard has unique capability, capacity, and authority that allow us to play a critical role in disaster response. The Coast Guard is a first responder, one of very few federal first responders, and the only national maritime first responder. Today I would like to discuss the Coast Guard’s primary missions in disaster response, our strengths, limitations, and some issues that we must focus on as the nation moves forward in this area.

**Primary Missions in Disaster Response**

The Coast Guard’s primary missions in domestic disaster response, supporting the states and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), are:

- 1) Saving lives in distress, and ensuring the survivability of our 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 and the 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 helicopters, boats, cutters, vehicles, and on foot rescued over 11,300 people and over 1,500 pets. In HARVEY, Coast Guard helicopter crews started rescuing mariners in peril<sup>1</sup> off the coast of Corpus Christi, Texas, just hours before Hurricane Harvey made landfall between Port Aransas and Port O’Connor.

For each of these storms and all natural disasters along our coastlines, Coast Guard crews are typically the first federal responders to re-enter an impacted area to conduct rescues and assess

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<sup>1</sup> Two MH-65’s from Sector/Air Station Corpus Christi saved 12 lives off a vessel taking on water in 45 knot sustained/60 knot gusting winds.

damage. I should note that in an average year, the Coast Guard saves 3,600 lives. The Coast Guard tripled that number in HARVEY alone.

In addition to search and rescue operations, the Coast Guard continued to flow forces into the impacted regions to restore ports and waterways, respond to pollution, where necessary provide security and additional law enforcement capability, and protect offshore petrochemical platforms. Within five weeks, Hurricanes HARVEY, IRMA, MARIA, and NATE impacted over 2,540 miles of shoreline<sup>2</sup>. The Coast Guard responded to 1,269 aids to navigation discrepancies, handled 290 pollution cases, targeted and assessed more than 3,623 grounded vessels, with more than 1,585 removed to date. Coast Guard Damage and Recovery Assessment Teams were on-scene within hours determining the status of ports and waterways, assessing the impacts to Coast Guard facilities and capabilities, and where possible leveraging technology such as the employment of electronic aids to navigation to facilitate the reopening of key ports and waterways.

Those of you who have had the opportunity to walk the ground in the most impacted parts of the Florida Keys, or to have navigated above Houston and Port Arthur's flooded streets and neighborhoods, or overfly the island of Puerto Rico, know the magnitude of the challenge our men and women have faced and the reconstruction issues our Nation will be dealing with for quite a while.

## **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 our people, whose bias for action and adaptability to rapidly changing circumstances and uncertainty never ceases to fill me with pride and admiration.

Our Coast Guard cutters, aircraft, and boats are built to respond to a variety of missions without the need for any real reconfiguration or the addition of special equipment. Cutters conducting counter-drug patrols in the Transit Zone are quickly diverted to disaster areas to provide command and control, deliver rotary wing air capability from the sea, conduct refueling, and, when necessary, provide forward staging facilities. Coast Guard aircraft that normally perform law enforcement surveillance to thwart transnational maritime criminal activities are 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, so they can respond quickly to emergent events. When a major catastrophe occurs, or is anticipated, we can reposition forces quickly to that area to optimize the response.

It is also important to note that 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.

Our two Area senior operational 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

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<sup>2</sup> Using CRS method of Shoreline Measurement: Texas: 367 mi, Louisiana: 397 mi, Florida: 1,350 mi, Puerto Rico: 311 mi, USVI: 117 mi

Continuity of Operations Plans for relocating command and control functions out of harm's way but strategically positioned to effectively conduct response and recovery operations.

In addition to fielding flexible, multi-mission forces and effective command and control systems, the Coast Guard also benefits from its 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 our forces are frequently integrated with U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) services in Joint Task Force organizations. We regularly provide forces in support of DOD exercises, Combatant Commander contingency plans, and theater security cooperation activities. This close cooperation and routinely exercised relationship at the service level enables 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. Our 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/whole-of-government response efforts 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 recent disaster 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 over 11,300 citizens in distress. The Coast Guard is small in comparison to the other Armed Services. With only 40,600 personnel on active duty, 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 deferred 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 a primary consideration for Coast Guard commanders responding to natural disasters.

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 seizing nearly 4,800 kilograms of cocaine worth nearly \$142 million and apprehending 19 drug smugglers while one of only four cutters patrolling the transit zone during the period of our peak hurricane response efforts. This included 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 our national disaster response capacity and capability.

When the Coast Guard has the opportunity to recapitalize our facilities, we need to make them more storm-resilient and survivable. In fact, several of our 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.

Investing in our infrastructure also supports our greatest resource, our people. Although we deployed approximately 3,000 Coast Guard women and men to support response operations, many more Coast Guardsmen responded to help those that were displaced and distressed, when in fact they and their loved ones were also displaced. The Coast Guard estimates approximately 700 Coast Guard families' homes have been damaged to the point where they will need to be relocated.

Preparedness is essential. No amount of response capacity and capability will be effective without a foundation of preparedness. Relationships between responders across all levels of government must be created, nurtured, and maintained before an actual event. It is too late to start building such relationships when a hurricane is barreling down on a coastal community. Advance planning and exercises, involving all potential responders, are a must for effective disaster response. Command and control constructs must be clarified, both in theory and in practice. Interoperability is critical and we must keep working to find the appropriate mechanisms that will optimize unity of effort.

## **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.

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