

Testimony of James H. Bassham
Director, Tennessee Emergency Management Agency
before the
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development
Thursday, July 22, 2010

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Senators:

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee. Governor Phil Bredesen has asked that I convey his personal thanks for your interest in the State of Tennessee's perspective of the Presidential Declared Disaster resulting from historic flooding during May of this year.

I would like to brief you on the sequence of events that took place in Tennessee and the resulting response and recovery efforts, which are still on-going.

In the evenings of April 30 through May 2, more than 22-inches of rain fell in the western portion of Tennessee. More than half of the state had reports of flooding damage and about a dozen tornadoes in the storm touched down in many locations. Twenty-four citizens were killed statewide, primarily by rushing water from flash flooding. Fed by massive rainfall and run-off from creeks and streams, our large rivers in the affected regions attained record crests.

At this time, I'd like to explain the nature of the state's response role during emergencies of this or any nature.

The Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA) is a division of the State's Military Department. The agency has the mission to coordinate emergency management response and recovery to reduce loss of life and property in the State of Tennessee. TEMA is empowered by state law and by the Governor's executive authority to perform its mission of protecting the public during emergencies and disasters. During a state of emergency, TEMA performs as an extension of the Governor's staff to ensure that the orders of the Governor are implemented and enforced.

TEMA is divided into two branches: Response and Preparedness. The Preparedness branch handles the planning, training, exercise, mitigation and various grants and programs offices, as well as the recovery process.

The Response branch has responsibility for both TEMA's Operations Section, including the state's 24-hour warning point, the agency's Communications networks and the regional offices with TEMA's area coordinators, who are the field response personnel that work closely with their assigned counties. Each area coordinator is responsible for coordinating directly with approximately six (6) of the state's total of 95 counties. County emergency management agencies are responsible under the County Mayor's legal authority for controlling the response to emergencies in their jurisdiction.

TEMA's operations watch-point element is the focal point for receiving warnings, making notifications to local governments in the counties, and arranging for initial response actions 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. There are two or more operations officers on duty at all times.

At the time of the May Flooding, TEMA had only 88 positions statewide, which includes all field personnel, administrative and headquarters staff.

With the limited manpower inside TEMA, the importance of the state's Emergency Service Coordinator (ESC) program cannot be understated. There are more than 120 primary or alternate ESCs representing all state agencies and departments. These crucial leadership positions report to the State Emergency Operations Center during an emergency and are empowered by state law with the full authority of their Commissioner. During an emergency, TEMA and the ESCs manage the state's many resources and coordinate responses using those assets to support incident commanders at the local government level.

These state ESCs attend regular monthly training meetings with TEMA and participate in full-scale exercises. The following departments have assigned to TEMA full-time embedded ESCs for enhanced coordination, planning and response purposes: Military (National Guard), Safety (Highway Patrol), Transportation and Human Services.

In addition to the ESCs, TEMA relies on individual liaisons from outside partners to provide critical information as well as links back to their own agencies. These liaisons include: non-governmental organizations American Red Cross and the Tennessee Volunteer Agencies Active in Disaster; private sector partners FedEx and Walmart; telecommunications providers AT&T and Verizon; and various federal agencies, such as FEMA, Civil Air Patrol and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

As a result of the May flooding, as many as 10,000 individuals were displaced and more than 1,500 homes were destroyed in Tennessee. Around the state, 102 bridges, 239 roads, and 19 water treatment plans were impacted or damaged.

Governor Bredesen has been very pleased with the federal response to the flooding. Within 24 hours of the floods, several Administration officials, including Secretary Napolitano, had called to ensure we were receiving the needed assistance and Administrator Fugate has made several visits to Tennessee.

Since then, more than 65,000 individuals have registered for FEMA assistance. To date, more than \$269 million in FEMA assistance has been provided to individuals in Tennessee. As a result of the storms and flooding, 49 counties received Presidential Disaster Declarations for some kind of federal assistance.

Regardless of how these numbers eventually rank it amongst other U.S. disasters, the May flooding was a tremendous event for Tennesseans. It is easily the largest disaster in recent memory with an unprecedented impact to infrastructure and the number of

impacted citizens. The total cost to the public for this disaster may not be known accurately for some time, but I suspect the figure for combined Public and Individual Assistance programs will also be a mark unequalled in our state's previous experience.

In spite of the fact that 24 lives were lost, the death toll for this flooding event was remarkably low. I'd like to attribute that success to two factors.

First, the proactive nature of the communications of warnings made by TEMA, local authorities and our partners at the National Weather Service to make clear to the public the threat flash flooding and flooding posed to their safety. The other is the dedication of our local and state first responders, and spirit of our many local volunteers, who saved more than 850 lives by performing rescue operations at great peril to their own lives during the flooding.

On Thursday, April 29, prior to the emergency, TEMA and the National Weather Service engaged in our usual coordination for potentially severe weather by participating in joint teleconferences with forecasters and state and the local emergency managers in West and Middle Tennessee. TEMA had already placed the SEOC in an elevated posture for monitoring the situation, but notices also were made to key personnel to be aware that a potential existed for an emergency situation to develop.

TEMA sent the first of 171 warnings to the counties at noon on Friday, as the storm struck in Memphis. During the next week, TEMA's Operations Center answered more than 4,000 calls with just six operations officers.

Overall, the SEOC handled 843 mission tasks relating to the flooding response. Those missions included receiving and distributing 2.5 million gallons of potable water to impacted communities, coordinating 3,000 state response personnel from 25 state departments and agencies, and 1,000 mutual aid responders from unaffected jurisdictions. In the state, more than 20,000 local jurisdiction personnel responded to the disaster, as well as the volunteers I mentioned earlier.

TEMA Operations also managed 17 new missions, 77 other incidents and 130 weather warnings that were in addition to the flooding events simultaneously underway.

The results achieved can be attributed to the fine men and women in TEMA and the contributions of many others inside government and within our communities.

This concludes my prepared remarks. I'd like to again thank the Senators for this opportunity to participate in this hearing.