



Senator Feinstein Calls for Independent FEMA, Comprehensive Regional Earthquake Preparedness

*- Federal disaster planning and response structure doesn't work;
Millions of Californians are wholly unprepared for the next "Big One" –
April 19, 2006*

San Francisco, Calif. – During a speech to 2,000 earthquake professionals from around the world, U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) today called for FEMA to be restored to an independent agency with direct access to the White House. In addition to restructuring FEMA, Senator Feinstein also stated that she believes that federal disaster plans for catastrophic events should be revamped. Senator Feinstein was the keynote speaker at a conference to commemorate the centennial anniversary of the 1906 earthquake.

“I have come to the conclusion that Congress should remove FEMA from the Department of Homeland Security and return the Director to a cabinet-level position in the White House,” Senator Feinstein said. **“It is clear to me that the present federal response structure doesn't work.**

“In a disaster, FEMA is primarily an agency that coordinates the efforts of the relevant departments and agencies. The only way FEMA can carry out a coordination responsibility of all federal assets is if it is a strong and independent agency with direct access to the President and thereby to the military and all assets of the federal government.

When FEMA was subsumed into the Department of Homeland Security it lost both the funding and access necessary for carrying out its coordinating responsibilities in a major disaster.”

April 18, 2006 marks the centennial anniversary of the great San Francisco earthquake and fire – one of the largest natural disasters in American history. During her remarks, Senator Feinstein also addressed her concerns about, and policy recommendations for, comprehensive regional and federal earthquake preparedness.

“Looking at the tremendous seismic risk in our state and our experience in the recent and distant past, the lesson before us today is that we must prepare and we must prepare now,” Senator Feinstein said.

Key excerpts of the Senator's remarks follow:

- On comprehensive regional planning:

“Based on my experience, our number one priority should be the preparation of a comprehensive disaster plan developed on a regional scale – here that would be the

9 Bay Area counties,” Senator Feinstein said. **“That plan should bring together, assign responsibility, and coordinate the preparedness, response, and recovery efforts of the state and federal government with all relevant authorities and jurisdictions within local multi-county regions who bear the responsibility for response.”**

- On the role of the federal government during catastrophic disasters:

“While retaining the ‘all-hazards’ approach and without usurping the responsibilities and capabilities of State and local officials, the federal government must take the lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina and other major disasters and prepare catastrophic disaster plans that offer clear and detailed directions on who is supposed to do what and where,” Senator Feinstein concluded.

- On regular disaster training and exercises:

“Clearly, if the responsible officials and agencies are not even familiar with the disaster plans, it won’t matter how well agencies are organized or how effective the plans are,” Senator Feinstein said. **“By holding regular training and exercises we can find the deficiencies in our planning and ensure that confusion over who should be doing what is settled before disaster strikes. But I want to stress that once-a-year large-scale exercises are not enough for cities and counties.”**

- On the vulnerability of California’s levees:

“To that end, I would propose that the Governor hold a levee summit early next year—as soon as the draft Bay Delta plan is completed—which would bring together the government agencies and officials, nongovernmental organizations, experts, and other stakeholders with a vested interest in this issue—so that we can more fully understand the risks and develop innovative and functional options for dealing with this serious problem,” Senator Feinstein said. **“It is clear that a comprehensive solution must be found, which means we are going to have to look at the entire area and make some difficult decisions.”**

Following is the prepared text of Senator Feinstein’s statement:

“I would like to thank the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute, the Seismological Society of America, and the California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services for convening this conference.

I would also like to thank the scientists, engineers, emergency managers, first responders, city planners, and elected officials here today for sharing your expertise and experience in protecting our homes and communities.

You truly save lives through your work, and I’m honored to be here with you today.

It was 100 years ago this week that 270 miles of the San Andreas Fault broke open, resulting in one of the most devastating disasters in American history.

Almost 30,000 buildings were destroyed, a quarter of Northern California's population was left homeless, and, most tragically, more than 3,000 people lost their lives.

Those of us in the Bay Area got a glimpse of the earth's destructive power during the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989. I remember standing in the Marina District, which was built on garbage from the 1915 Pan Pacific exposition, and looking at apartment buildings and homes that came down, water mains broken, sidewalks cracked and creviced. It was a heartbreaking experience.

But despite the terrible damage, Loma Prieta only released 3% of the energy of the 1906 quake.

According to the U.S. Geological Survey there is a 62% chance of a 6.7 magnitude quake or larger in the Bay Area before 2032.

Looking at the tremendous seismic risk in our state and our experience in the recent and distant past, the lesson before us today is that **we must prepare and we must prepare now.**

This will require sacrifice and difficult choices, but we have no option. The threat is too great.

- Based on my experience, our number one priority should be the preparation of a comprehensive disaster plan developed on a regional scale – here that would be the 9 Bay Area countries.

That plan should bring together, assign responsibility, and coordinate the preparedness, response, and recovery efforts of the state and federal government with all relevant authorities and jurisdictions within local multi-county regions who bear the responsibility for response.

In a post-9/11, post-Katrina world, this type of robust and fully regional planning offers the only effective preparation for a major disaster.

We need to remember that state and local authorities hold primary responsibility for disaster preparedness and response. You've got to get it together fast. That means be prepared.

Therefore, the first step toward regional preparedness is that each city and each county should have its own disaster plan clearly spelling out contingencies.

Cities and counties should have continually updated manuals that address such needs as:

- how to clear streets;
- how to get first responders who live outside the county back in during a disaster;
- where large-scale earth moving equipment can be found and how it can be brought quickly to the scene;
- which areas and structures are most at risk, what buildings are likely to fail, and where to bring the wounded; and

- which building codes need review and tightening.

But, in a large-scale event, individual cities or counties simply will not have the resources to respond. In that case entire regions must be able to respond jointly through mutual aid, acting in close coordination with the federal and state authorities.

Of course the only way a comprehensive regional preparedness capability will work in a catastrophic event is if the state and federal agencies are fully prepared to come in quickly.

Fortunately, California has a proven emergency response system that coordinates the work of relevant agencies and can draw on a force of 150,000 trained emergency responders.

Unfortunately, in terms of federal preparedness, Hurricane Katrina says it all.

The federal government is clearly not prepared to respond to catastrophic events.

In the face of this large-scale disaster, the federal response was disjointed, disorganized, and confused.

There was no clear chain of command and bureaucratic obstacles stymied efforts every step of the way.

In all, there was a disturbing and clear lack of training among responsible local, state, and federal officials, a lack of decisive leadership, and insufficient federal planning.

Perhaps what concerns me most is that the GAO report on Katrina says that the federal government is making the same mistakes as ten years ago in the response to Hurricane Andrew.

- I have come to the conclusion that Congress should remove FEMA from the Department of Homeland Security and return the Director to a cabinet-level position in the White House.

It is clear to me that the present federal response structure doesn't work.

In a disaster, FEMA is primarily an agency that coordinates the efforts of the relevant departments and agencies.

The only way FEMA can carry out a coordination responsibility of all federal assets is if it is a strong and independent agency with direct access to the President and thereby to the military and all assets of the federal government.

Clearly, you don't create a strong agency when FEMA is only one of 22 departments and 180,000 employees.

When FEMA was subsumed into the Department of Homeland Security, it lost both the funding and access necessary for carrying out its coordinating responsibilities in a major disaster.

I remember vividly during the Northridge earthquake that James Lee Witt, Director of FEMA at the time, was there on the ground with immediate access to the President and the authority to direct needed resources.

The result was a more effective federal response.

A cabinet-level Director, leading a reworked and reconstituted FEMA outside of the Department of Homeland Security, would create the vital link between the Governor and the White House and provide the necessary prominence, resources, and flexibility for fulfilling its mission.

- In addition to restructuring FEMA, federal disaster plans for catastrophic events should be revamped.

Both GAO and White House reports on the federal response to Katrina have concluded that the portion of the National Response Plan dealing with catastrophic events does not adequately assess needs, capabilities, and implementation concerns for dealing with large-scale disasters.

To cite one example: one week after Katrina made landfall, confusion and debate still remained over whether the Department of Homeland Security or the FBI would serve as the lead agency in public safety and law enforcement efforts.

This is completely unacceptable.

While retaining the 'all-hazards' approach and without usurping the responsibilities and capabilities of State and local officials, the federal government must take the lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina and other major disasters and prepare catastrophic disaster plans that offer clear and detailed directions on who is supposed to do what and where.

- Secondly, I strongly feel that regular disaster training and exercises must become a national priority.

California holds a large-scale training exercise called Golden Guardian each year, bringing together all relevant federal, state, county, and local agencies to practice dealing with a catastrophic event.

This needs to be repeated in cities, counties, and states throughout the country so that everyone from mayors and fire chiefs all the way on up to the Director of Homeland Security know exactly what to do during a disaster.

The House committee investigating the response to Katrina found among federal agencies a widespread unfamiliarity with the National Response Plan.

Clearly, if the responsible officials and agencies are not even familiar with the disaster plans, it won't matter how well agencies are organized or how effective the plans are.

By holding regular training and exercises we can find the deficiencies in our planning and ensure that confusion over who should be doing what is settled before disaster strikes.

But I want to stress that once-a-year large-scale exercises are not enough for cities and counties.

As Mayor of San Francisco, I insisted on frequent and extensive drilling of emergency plans and updating of the emergency manual.

Every Monday morning at 7:00AM, we tested the Mayor's Emergency Phone System, which was independent of the City's phone system.

I also had a two-way radio close to me at all times as did key staff and department heads.

These weekly tests kept key officials on their toes and provided a direct line of communication should land lines go down.

Beyond the weekly drills, we also held periodic exercises where we activated the City's emergency command center and specific staff and officials knew to report there. And we conducted yearly large-scale table-top exercises to practice how to fully respond to varying scenarios of earthquake damage, loss of life and injury.

I did this for nine years. The year after I left office Loma Prieta hit. The City was prepared.

- Another source of grave concern is the condition of our state's levee system.

One of the initial mysteries of the 1906 quake was the degree of shaking in the City of Santa Rosa, which despite being 55 miles north of San Francisco, experienced more intense shaking than San Francisco.

In large part, this phenomenon has been ascribed to Santa Rosa's position on a sedimentary basin, a low area where soft sediments have accumulated over time.

When seismic waves hit these basins, the loose sediment acts like water in a bathtub, and the waves are amplified in both intensity and duration causing heavier and longer shaking.

The largest sedimentary basin in California can be found in the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta region, home to an aging 2,600-mile levee system that protects two-thirds of the state's drinking water supply.

Earlier this year, I toured our State's flood control infrastructure in Sacramento and throughout the Delta where I saw beautiful communities, subdivisions, farms, and businesses protected by simple earthen levees.

It was clear to me that these levees would fail in the event of a major earthquake, and the result would be far beyond any disaster we have ever experienced.

There would be massive fatalities and massive evacuations, with hundreds of thousands losing their homes and the entire state being brought to a stand still. Sacramento is the only city of its size that does not have 100 year flood protection in all parts of the city.

Governor Schwarzenegger has declared of state of emergency in 7 counties and is advancing funds for the repair of 24 high-priority sites. At the federal level we will do our level best to find the federal match.

The bottom line though is that the cost to rebuild 2,600 miles of levees is ultimately and regrettably prohibitive, as it could eventually mean spending well over \$10 billion and even that would not necessarily provide sufficient earthquake protection.

What is necessary then is for us to begin to think outside of the box with respect to protecting the Delta.

To that end, I would propose that the Governor hold a levee summit early next year—as soon as the draft Bay Delta plan is completed—which would bring together the government agencies and officials, nongovernmental organizations, experts, and other stakeholders with a vested interest in this issue—so that we can more fully understand the risks and develop innovative and functional options for dealing with this serious problem.

It is clear that a comprehensive solution must be found, which means we are going to have to look at the entire area and make some difficult decisions.

I would like to close with an experience that forever cemented for me the choices we face.

As I said, every Monday morning when I was Mayor, I held a department head meeting. And department heads generally waited until after the meeting to give me bad news.

One day, the Director of Public Works stayed after the meeting and said, ‘Madam Mayor, I think if there was an earthquake, the rim around Candlestick Park would come down.’

I said, ‘How much will it cost?’

He said, ‘I’ll get back to you.’

Two weeks later he came in with the figure -- \$6 million.

Well, we didn’t have \$6 million. Then I thought, ‘I now know that this rim could come down. It’s up to me to do something about it.’

So we took money from other projects. Funded the retrofit. Funded the construction.

Just as game three of the series was set to begin at 5 p.m. with a capacity crowd at Candlestick Park, the Loma Prieta earthquake struck the Bay Area.

The field rippled. The rim shook. But it held. That was a big learning lesson for me.

When you’ve got information that could save lives and property, you’ve got to act.

This represents the threat and the task before us. In each of our communities we have issues that we must deal with to prepare for when the next big earthquake occurs.

I vow to do all I can to help you prepare.”

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