

FEMA says it's ready for hurricanes  
By Brad Heath, USA TODAY  
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WASHINGTON — The government has fixed most of the problems that undermined its response to Hurricane Katrina, even though an updated federal disaster plan is not completed, Federal Emergency Management Agency chief R. David Paulison told lawmakers Tuesday. At a House Homeland Security Committee hearing, Paulison said the plan should be finished next month. He had previously notified Congress that it wouldn't be ready by the June 1 deadline, the start of the hurricane season.

"You're not going to see the same kind of response. You're going to see a federal government that is very proactive," Paulison said.

Chairman Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., called the delay "very disturbing" and said, "FEMA will have a lot of explaining to do if it is not ready when a hurricane makes landfall this season."

Paulison said FEMA is working with coastal states to find gaps in their disaster plans.

"There is no question in my mind whatsoever that you are not going to see another Katrina happen in this country," Paulison said.

This year's hurricane season, which runs through Nov. 30, threatens to be "very active," according to forecasters at Colorado State University, who predict as many as 17 tropical storms. The first named storm of the year formed last week off Georgia, the earliest one since 1981.

Lawmakers asked repeatedly whether National Guard deployments to war zones would take resources away from disasters. Paulison and Craig Fugate, Florida's emergency management director, said enough Guardsmen are available. "We are going to prepare for whatever storm comes our way with what we have," Paulison said.

Separately, officials laid out steps they say will fix many of the problems in aid programs and agencies swamped when Katrina struck in August 2005. The Small Business Administration can issue disaster loans more quickly, SBA disaster liaison Becky Brantley said. Paulison said FEMA improved its ability to communicate with state and local officials, hired more-experienced managers and found ways to better track its supplies. The American Red Cross stockpiled supplies to shelter 500,000 people.

"We are certainly better prepared than we ever have been before," said Carol Hall, the Red Cross' homeland security director.

None of those changes has been tested on a scale large enough to know how well they will work, said William Jenkins, who oversees homeland security issues for the Government Accountability Office.