

Statement of Robert M. Burdette, Town Administrator  
Town of Mount Pleasant, South Carolina  
Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation  
February 19, 2002

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and Senator Breaux,

My name is Robert McPherson Burdette. I am the Town Administrator for Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, and I am appearing on behalf of Mayor Harry M. Hallman and the Mount Pleasant Town Council. Mayor Hallman sends his warmest regards. I lead somewhat of a double life in that when I am not the Town Administrator for Mount Pleasant, I am a Colonel in the US Army Reserve, assigned to First US Army as the Emergency Preparedness Liaison Officer to the State of South Carolina. My testimony will draw from both my civilian and military careers as well as from interviews with the Chiefs of our Police and Fire Departments.

First, Mount Pleasant is a bedroom community of 50,000. The Wando Welch Port Terminal, located on the Wando River, is bordered on three sides by the Town of Mount Pleasant, even though the port itself is not in the corporate limits. Interstate 526 serves the Welch Terminal. There is one two-lane road leading to and from the port from I-526. A residential community of over 5,000 is located within one third of a mile of the Welch Terminal gate, with the closest neighborhood being literally a stones throw from a large container yard.

S. 1214 is a major step in the right direction in addressing port security issues, particularly in regard to incident prevention and incident response. The emphasis on planning and preparation is noteworthy. The Town of Mount Pleasant has an outstanding working relationship with the US Coast Guard. The Port Captain and his staff communicate well with our Police and Fire Department commands. Moreover, by virtue of my position as Emergency Preparedness Liaison Officer for First US Army, I am an ex officio member of the local Port Readiness Committee, and attend those meetings, which also address security, on a regular basis.

While S.1214 provides a sound foundation for developing a better port security approach, it may not go far enough in certain areas. First, the Act, as well as the objectives of its operating elements, does not

seem to recognize that most of our ports are surrounded by dense to moderately dense urban and suburban populations. These residents and businesses are generally ignorant of port operations and are, for the most part, not aware of the potential threat posed by incidents, accidental or intentional, that may occur on or around these facilities.

For instance, I am told that the Wando Welch Terminal is one of the few ports on the East Coast certified to receive and ship explosives. An assessment of this threat to surrounding areas, to my knowledge, has never been completed. I would suggest that security assessments include threat assessments to surrounding populations due to the types of shipments that are authorized at US ports.

Second, the Act refers to the need to involve local government agencies in port security planning. This cannot be emphasized enough. One of the most significant problems to date is that local law enforcement agencies only receive unclassified information from federal agencies regarding terrorist threats. We realize that sensitive information in the wrong hands can create huge problems and pose great risk to law enforcement agents. Nevertheless, with over 300,000 local law enforcement officers in the United States, local government law enforcement constitutes a major effort in preventing incidents by good solid police work, but we do need the information in advance. At some point, federal law enforcement is going to have to trust local Chiefs of Police and Sheriffs if we are to eradicate the terrorist element in our midst. We have a need to know. If necessary, establish a process where directors of local law enforcement can receive security clearances, and then hold them responsible for this classified information just as you would an officer in the US military. Moreover, all of our law enforcement agencies in the vicinity of the port need to be able to communicate. To this end, resources are needed to equip the agencies with compatible communications equipment. Currently, all law enforcement agencies cannot talk with one another effectively during an emergency.

Third, while it may be implied, I saw no mention of the Army National Guard in the Act's provisions. This must be included specifically. The National Guard departments of our states have certainly proven valuable in enhancing our airport security, and I would suggest they have a major role to play at our ports and harbors. They must, however, receive additional appropriation to make the kind of contribution that is needed.

Next, I wish to turn my attention to incident response and consequence management. The South Carolina Army National Guard has established the 43<sup>rd</sup> Weapons of Mass Destruction Civil Support Team near Fort Jackson. This team, commanded by LTC Randy Clayton, is one of the 22 like units throughout the United States established to detect chemical and biological agents and to assess overall threat to an incident. The South Carolina unit was recently certified by the Department of the Army to carry out its mission. I respectfully submit that the greatest threat for chemical, nuclear, and biological attacks may be through our ports and that augmentation of this unit near our ports and harbors perhaps should be considered. Currently, it would take three to four hours for the 43<sup>rd</sup> Civil Support Team to arrive in Charleston and be prepared for testing and analysis. While local governments have some detection and analysis capability, none have the capability of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Civil Support Teams.

Lastly, I will speak specifically about the Port of Charleston. When the US Navy abandoned the Charleston Navy Base and Shipyard, it took with it most of the portside and waterside fire fighting capability that was available to Charleston Harbor. At one time, we had over 1,000 trained shipboard firefighters in the Charleston area. Today, the local governments of Charleston have 96 trained shipboard firefighters. Moreover, the Navy took most of the equipment that is necessary to attack ship and portside fires. We must now rely on commercial tugboat companies and limited US Coast Guard support for response. We have little or no foam fire fighting capability. I would suggest that assessments of port security include local fire fighting capability and hazardous material response capability, and that the Congress should address equipment, manpower, and training through an appropriation.

We are also concerned about cutbacks to our customs agents in Charleston, who in the past, have had as their primary responsibility, the Charleston Port. We understand that as many as five customs agents in Charleston have been temporarily reassigned to other missions as a result of the 9-11 tragedy. Talking about security will simply not be enough. It must be resourced, and of course, that costs money. I have also heard that there has been a reduction in state port security personnel over the last five years or so.

If we are to have secure ports, an investment must be made at the local, state, and federal levels. I hope that the assistance will not be in the form of mandates that are unresourced. Any bill that requires a

commitment of manpower and equipment to achieve security of our ports must be accompanied by a funding package.

Senator Hollings, Senator Breaux, I wish to thank you for allowing me the honor of presenting this testimony today. I will be pleased to answer any of your questions.