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**TESTIMONY
BEFORE THE**

**SENATE COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION SUBCOMMITTEE ON
OCEANS, ATMOSPHERE, FISHERIES AND COAST GUARD**

ON

**COAST GUARD READINESS: HOW FAR CAN WE STRETCH OUR
NATION'S ONLY MULTI-MISSION, MILITARY FORCE?**

THE UNITED STATES SENATE

November 16, 2017

INTRODUCTION

Thank you, Chairman Sullivan, Ranking Member Peters, and distinguished members of the Committee, for allowing me the opportunity to provide you with a statement for the record on our nation's Coast Guard. I am Lee Smithson, the Director of the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency. I was appointed to this emergency management position after retiring from the Mississippi National Guard where I served as a Colonel and the Director of Military Support. In both roles, I have worked with the U.S. Coast Guard on numerous events along the Mississippi Gulf Coast and Mississippi River. The longest and most notable was in April 2010 during the BP-Deepwater Horizon explosion and subsequent oil spill that devastated the Gulf of Mexico.

I was sent, by then Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour, to the Mississippi Gulf Coast to assist with the establishment of a Unified Command Post for Deepwater Horizon. From the beginning, Mississippi's relationship with the Coast Guard, the mandated lead response agency to the spill, had significant challenges.

Mississippi responders were well-versed in emergency response operations and the need for an integrated local, state and federal partnership because of our experiences during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Katrina taught us that the only way to ensure the needs of citizens are served is by close collaboration and a unified approach to all actions. While the Coast Guard was instrumental in the Katrina response, especially in New Orleans, they were not the lead federal agency. Deepwater Horizon was different and the Coast Guard was designated as the Federal On-Scene Coordinator. The lessons we learned during Katrina were the same lessons the Coast

Guard had to learn during Deepwater Horizon. It took until middle of June for the Coast Guard to obtain a firm grasp on the need for a unified approach.

In the years since the Oil Spill, it is very apparent that the Coast Guard has worked diligently in establishing a positive rapport with its local, state and federal partners. In fact, it is my opinion that no other federal agency has done more to learn the nuances of a unified approach to disaster response and consequence management than the U.S. Coast Guard. My agency frequently meets with the Coast Guard and we have conducted numerous joint training exercises ranging from search and rescue to a weapon of mass destruction response.

In recent years, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has championed the “Whole of Community” concept. This concept brings together residents, emergency management officials, organizations and community leaders, along with government officials to collectively assess the needs of each community communities. It also vital in determining the best ways to organize and strengthen assets, capacities, and interests. In Mississippi, we lead the way in our whole community approach with the adage that no one gets left out. We work hard every day to foster partnerships with all our local, state and federal agencies and organizations to facilitate effective response and recover to disasters.

When Hurricane Nate struck my state last month, the preparedness and mitigation efforts undertaken since Hurricane Katrina produced no injuries and minimal damage to our coastal communities. Our comprehensive emergency planning, with entities like the U.S. Coast Guard, exemplified our ability to prepare not only the public and their property, but local governments as well more than 48 hours before landfall. There were only two rescues that needed to be made during Hurricane Nate, but the coordination with the U.S. Coast Guard in our operations center along with the USCG Sector Mobile and USCG Sector Lower Mississippi River had us prepared to do many more. In addition, the federal investments to mitigation made since 2005 in Mississippi, showed a tremendous return on investment as we saw very little serious damage to homes, public property or infrastructure. I guarantee you, had we not received the federal support in mitigation funding post Katrina, we would have seen tens of millions of dollars in damage caused by Nate, a category one hurricane.

While I’m not here today to discuss budgets, I would like to leave you with this thought: If the Coast Guard had additional resources, I and my counterparts across the nation would be able to have more direct contact with Coast Guard personnel if they were stationed inside our emergency operations centers on a daily basis, not just during large scale emergencies. In the sixteen years since the September 11 terrorist attacks on our nation, all too often our leaders have forgotten how important it is to maintain a constant state of readiness. Readiness translates to resources. Our Coast Guard must have highly qualified, motivated and dedicated service members. Their equipment must be modern and fully functional. As our nation’s only multi-role military force, we must have a coast guard that can perform each of its missions in a superlative manner. I’m proud of my agency’s relationship with the U.S. Coast Guard and I am committed to maintaining that rapport.

Thank you for allowing me to be here today.