

FIRST RESPONSE BROADCASTERS ACT

Ms. LANDRIEU. Mr. President, I rise today not to speak about the Iraq war or the supplemental, which has been the focus of this morning's debate. I will return to the floor later to speak on both of those subjects. I wanted to take a minute this morning, while we had some time, to speak about a bill I intend to introduce later this week with my cochair, the ranking member of our new Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery, Senator TED STEVENS from Alaska, and other members of my subcommittee, Senators CARPER and PRYOR, as we begin to lay down pieces of legislation that are apparent and necessary to improve the general disaster response for this country, which has been found to be severely lacking.

The bill I will introduce later today is called the First Response Broadcasters Act. It is a piece of legislation, as I said, I will be filing with other members of my subcommittee.

As my State continues to rebuild out of the rubble and destruction and devastation of the first and third worst natural disasters to hit the country, and the subsequent levee breaks that filled up a major American city within 24 hours and continues to wreak havoc on those struggling to get home and rebuild their lives, we learned one of the most vital lessons was that information—good information, accurate information—was not only vital, but it was essential as the first building block to our recovery. In providing it, all of our local media—broadcasters, Web sites and newspapers—did an amazing job to keep the people of Louisiana and our region and the gulf coast informed. Frankly, they also kept informed the Nation and world community that was aghast at what was happening in south Louisiana and the New Orleans region from Katrina, and in the Southwest region from Rita 4 weeks later.

With phone lines down, cell phones out, and streets too flooded to move around to get any kind of perspective about what was actually happening, and where the 4 to 20 feet of water was coming from, when we had never seen anything like that in the history of our city, the sound of local radio and television stations was what hundreds of thousands of my constituents relied on. It was the only voice for them in the first darkest days and nights, and it continued for weeks and months. Actually, Mr. President, it continues to this day. And because of the credibility of our local broadcasters at a time when the public needed them, they were there. Our local broadcasters provided lifesaving information.

As you will recall, we have lost over 1,000 lives in Louisiana and over 200 lives in Mississippi. But many lives, I am convinced, were saved because broadcasters, having lost their own stations, their own equipment, their own homes, and with their own loved ones missing, stayed on the job. More importantly, they stayed on the air so

the reporters could report what was happening, and even those of us in powerful positions could get a better handle on the situation.

As local radio and television stations stand up, as so many did, and put commercial interests aside to serve the public interest, the Federal Government, in my opinion, should be ready to stand up with them. That is what this bill is about. It is not a long or complicated bill. It really doesn't cost very much money. But it will have a major impact as this Nation tries to fashion better responses for our country. We are in desperate need of new tools, new tool boxes, and this is one of them.

In fact, for more than 50 years, we have required local broadcasters to be at the front line of sounding the alarm in a disaster. With the entire industry dependent upon public airwaves, broadcasters have a duty to serve the public in times of crisis. That is what so many of them did.

This is why stations today are required by law to be part of the emergency alert system. At the system's core are 34 primary entry points, radio stations with direct lines from emergency command centers in Washington and in their State. But half of our States don't even have these entry points. To receive an alert in Mississippi, for example, you needed to rely on the message being passed on from station to station from an entry point in Louisiana.

One of the several things this bill does is add primary entry points to every underserved State and region to make sure every State has an equal chance to be well prepared when disaster strikes and to try to put their best assets forward. I have said many times that all the assets in the world, all the plans in the world are not worth the paper they are written on, or the text found on Internet Web sites, if you cannot communicate them at the appropriate time to the appropriate people in the appropriate order.

What good is a successful emergency information chain if the last link fails? By technical necessity, this last link is right in the disaster's path. Simply put, a transmitter needs to be in the same area as the people in need of a warning.

Despite our Federal investment in emergency systems and entry point stations, there were several gulf coast broadcasters after the hurricanes who could not stay on the air simply because the Government, our Government, took their fuel away. Let me repeat this. The stations struggling to stay on the air, to tell first responders and others what was actually happening, to try to get their signals up, their electricity up, so when people in Washington kept asking what is going on, we could give some answers, the fuel was confiscated because some low-level FEMA person decided they had higher priorities.

When this bill is passed, local broadcasters will be on the list as first re-

sponders, and their food, water, and fuel will not be allowed to be taken away, so that the public can get the information they are desperate for in as independent and accurate way as possible.

It also creates a matching grant program. It also helps to bring broadcast engineers back into the disaster zone more quickly to restore transmitters and other key facilities.

No disaster warning evacuation plan or emergency instruction matters if it cannot get to the people who need to hear it. That is basically why this bill is so important.

Finally, the bill is very important for the journalists, who depend on all of this equipment, technology and access to do their job, which is to report the story in as accurate a fashion as they can to the public that needs to respond, as well as the first responders themselves, and to Government leaders.

For journalists working to tell the story, newspapers and Web sites included, the bill makes sure that the local officials who know the local reporters best decide where the journalists can go, who can go and how long they can stay.

Again, there will be no longer a contract, part-time FEMA official directing the news media or the broadcasters. The law will govern their basic rights, put them on the right list, make it clear they themselves are first responders and, in this Senator's view, extremely important first responders.

I am extremely pleased to have Senator STEVENS join me. This is a bipartisan bill. It is not complicated, it is rather simple, but critical as we begin to stand up a better disaster response this country is certainly most worthy of. The people of Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Florida, and other parts of the country are still suffering from disasters that in split seconds, in minutes, sometimes in a few hours, dash the hopes and dreams of millions of Americans.

We cannot prevent tornadoes. We most certainly cannot prevent hurricanes. We cannot prevent earthquakes. We can do a better job of predicting them. But the most important thing we can do is to warn people and help people deal with these terrible tragedies that come their way.

In this Senator's view, we have a lot of work to do.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. SUNUNU. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.