

2. POLICY POSITION

NATURAL DISASTERS IN THE SOUTH

Background

In mid-September of 1989 a hurricane formed in the Atlantic, one which would become among the most destructive in recent years---Hurricane Hugo. The hurricane caused widespread destruction in much of the Caribbean---in Guadeloupe, the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, among other places, before hitting land at Charleston, South Carolina, on the night of Thursday, September 21, and the morning of Friday, September 22. Winds at Charleston reached 135 miles per hour, and tides exceeded 20 feet, which made many islands and low-lying areas impassable. While Charleston bore the brunt of the storm, damage was not confined to that area alone; coastal damage occurred 100 miles up from Charleston, all the way to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Damage also occurred well inland; the city of Charlotte, North Carolina, suffered severe damage from the aftereffects of the hurricane, even though the city is 200 miles inland.

Certainly one reason that loss of life from Hugo and the California earthquake was minimal has to do with advance warning. And in the case of Hurricane Hugo, advances in weather forecasting and technology, via satellites and weather reconnaissance flights, helped minimize loss of both life and property. To be sure, predicting the exact path of a hurricane remains an inexact science; even 24 hours before Hugo struck land, forecasters could only say that the hurricane would hit land somewhere between Georgia and North Carolina. Residents of low-lying areas between Brunswick, Georgia and Wilmington, North Carolina---a distance of about 300 miles---evacuated, such as was only possible with the most current weather information.

States within the boundaries of the Southern Legislative Conference (SLC) are particularly vulnerable to hurricanes. Ten of the 15 member states border the Gulf of Mexico and/or the Atlantic Ocean. In just the last 3 decades alone, the South has been hit by several severe hurricanes; in 1969, Hurricane Camille struck the coast of Louisiana and Mississippi, killing 256 people; three years later, Hurricane Agnes caused destruction from Florida to New York, killing 188 people. And in 1979, Hurricane David struck Alabama, after having killed hundreds in the Caribbean.

States in the Southern Legislative Conference also are vulnerable to earthquakes; although such occurrences are usually associated with California and other western states,

severe earthquakes struck the region at least twice during the 1800s---in Kentucky and Missouri (1811) and in Charleston, South Carolina (1886), and aftershocks from both earthquakes were felt hundreds of miles away. While fault lines in southern states have not been very active in recent years, scientists warn that most of the states within the SLC region are indeed vulnerable to earthquakes, the consequences of which could be even more severe than those which have struck California in recent years, as few buildings in southern states are built to withstand earthquakes.

Of more recent concern is renewed interest in the United States Department of Defense in abdicating responsibility for the continuation of hurricane/weather reconnaissance flights. The Department has proposed ceasing these flights on September 30, 1990 and transferring responsibility for the flights to the United States Department of Commerce, although it is the understanding of the Southern Legislative Conference at this time that the Department of Commerce has not elected to assume this responsibility.

While there may be valid arguments for transferring these flights to the Department of Commerce, such determination requires much further study, and as the hurricane season does not end until November, the elimination of the flights may imperil many coastal residents.

It is true that weather satellites play an important role in tracking the direction of hurricanes, but the use of these instruments cannot be a substitute for the reconnaissance flights, the latter of which provide more up-to-date information. Last year, when Hurricane Hugo was moving toward the eastern coast of the United States, weather reconnaissance flights spotted a change in the path of Hugo, an observation which facilitated evacuation of coastal and low-lying areas in South Carolina and no doubt saved lives. As more of the nation's population moves to coastal areas, the importance of these flights becomes even greater.

It is perhaps inevitable that as democracy spreads throughout the world as it is now, great pressure is exerted on the Department of Defense to significantly reduce its budget. While changing times may dictate such a budget reduction, it is difficult to comprehend why reconnaissance flights should be eliminated.

The yearly cost of these flights (less than \$30 million) makes up less than .01 percent of the total defense budget, much less than the cost of a modern bomber, fighter or battleship. In light of the danger increasingly-populated areas face with regard to hurricanes, the elimination of such

flights can only be described as "penny wise but pound foolish."

Recommendation

The Southern Legislative Conference is keenly aware of the devastating effects a natural disaster can have on the people and the land, emotionally, physically and economically.

In the wake of both Hurricane Hugo and the California earthquake, the Southern Legislative Conference expresses considerable concern for the continuation of critical services such as air reconnaissance flights and expedient relief from FEMA for areas hit by a natural disaster.

Understanding recent moves by the United States Department of Defense to eliminate the weather reconnaissance flight, the Southern Legislative Conference opposes any discontinuation of these flights, which provide vital weather information. While it may be appropriate for the United States Department of Commerce to accept responsibility for these flights, the Conference believes that such a transfer should be considered only after a detailed study of the issue, and not based on haste or supposed need to meet upcoming budget deadlines.

Recognizing that continued levels of funding for the flights could be in jeopardy due to impending budget cuts, the Southern Legislative Conference urges Congress to safeguard such programs from budget reductions.

Furthermore, the Southern Legislative Conference strongly urges Congress to review the necessity of these services which protect both life and property from natural disasters and which when activated expeditiously, restore the quality of life to victims and areas of natural disasters at a time when so much has been lost.

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