

HSPI Commentary Series

THE GULF OIL DISASTER: THREE STEPS TO FEDERAL LEADERSHIP

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Hurricane Alex should serve as a wake-up call for the President that the Gulf oil response requires broad support from throughout his Administration. The efforts of Thad Allen and his unified command organization are commendable given the seemingly indomitable challenges they face on ground, but the President cannot reasonably expect any one individual or organization to alone succeed given the present situation. To address the increasing challenges, the President must have his Administration shoulder greater responsibility. We call upon the President to take three immediate steps.

First, the President should empower his Secretary of Homeland Security to execute her interagency coordination role under [Homeland Security Presidential Directive-5](#) (HSPD-5) as the “principal Federal official for domestic incident management.” A strategic coordinator would synchronize what are presently ad hoc efforts and bring together other efforts outside the scope of Thad Allen’s responsibilities. For example, the Secretary of Homeland Security could play a leadership role by: coordinating involvement of senior Administration officials in joint oil/hurricane response planning for the region; addressing the [State Department’s failure to effectively coordinate](#) offers of international assistance; and, working with the Secretary of the Navy to execute his [new Gulf Coast recovery responsibilities](#). Acknowledging Secretary Napolitano’s role would have the additional benefit of making a senior member of the Administration accountable to the President for the entire spectrum of challenges associated with the disaster, present and future.



Second, consistent with HSPD-5, the Obama Administration should embrace the playbook that guides the nation's response to man-made and natural disasters—the [National Response Framework](#) (NRF). The NRF's strength is its interagency and intergovernmental foundation, which Federal, state, and local agencies already utilize during incidents. By contrast, the current on-scene command is primarily using the coordinating mechanisms described in the [Oil Pollution Act](#). While this is generally adequate for a “traditional” oil spill, the issues associated with the current disaster are far more complex. This is especially true now that hurricane season has arrived and a Presidential disaster declaration under a competing authority, the [Stafford Act](#), is increasingly likely. The only mechanism capable of managing a combined oil and hurricane catastrophe is the NRF.

Third, the President should direct the FEMA to play a central role, as described in the NRF. At its core, FEMA is the Federal government's coordinator of disaster support. With robust coordinating mechanisms, and operations centers at the Federal and regional levels, FEMA can help coordinate the Federal support required for the current crisis as well as help plan for the next stages of the disaster. This would not only help alleviate the burden on the on-scene command in the Gulf, but would also ensure that if a hurricane were to strike, that FEMA and the on-scene command would be fully synchronized.

Even BP now recognizes the value of taking additional actions as the crisis deepens. The company recently announced that it had hired former FEMA Director James Lee Witt to advise the company on response planning. While we are pleased to see that BP came to this conclusion, the Obama Administration has yet to effectively leverage a capable leader on its own payroll. The current leader of FEMA, Craig Fugate, is a skilled professional with the apparent full support of both the President and the Secretary of Homeland Security, as well as strong connections to state and local emergency managers currently involved in the response—including Florida, where Fugate served as Director of Emergency Management for eight years prior to taking up his current post. But he has played only a behind-the-scenes supporting role during the oil disaster, likely because of reticence from above. The same was true in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti, when Fugate and his agency quietly propped up the Federal response when the State Department's efforts floundered.

We acknowledge that having DHS and FEMA play central roles is politically challenging for the President. First, adopting this course of action would tie the president closer to the disaster. For every action he takes to “federalize” the response, he is less able to point the finger at BP. Second, Gulf residents still experiencing a Katrina hangover are unlikely to embrace the image of FEMA. But the Agency today is much different than it was at the time of Katrina and residents would now likely warm to a FEMA role if they knew it could improve their present situation. Finally, with an active hurricane season expected ahead, it is almost inevitable that FEMA will have to be activated in the oil-impacted areas. Thus, we ask

the rhetorical question: wouldn't it make sense to have FEMA play a leadership role *before* a storm strikes?

The deteriorating situation in the Gulf demonstrates the need for a more comprehensive response effort. Now is the time for the Obama Administration to show it can effectively manage this crisis.

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