



## Report: Katrina, Rita challenges still remain

By Jeremy Alford

Monday, December 15, 2008

A new report out by a Louisiana nonprofit organization examines some of the recovery misconceptions that state and local officials continue to combat more than three years after hurricanes Katrina and Rita washed ashore. The [Public Affairs Research Council](#) has issued similar “GulfGov Reports” on a regular basis since the 2005 storm season. The most recent, “Three Years after Katrina and Rita, Challenges Remain,” presents a frustrating picture of Louisiana officials combating something labeled as “Katrina Fatigue” in Washington, D.C., and across the nation.

With related recovery work expected to last roughly a decade, state and local officials in Louisiana’s impacted parishes are spending considerable time and resources countering misconceptions as they work to rebuild, according to the report. For instance, while many people believe all of the federal money assigned to the disasters has been distributed, there is often a delay in that process and Louisiana is still waiting on some dollars, even today.

More than three years have passed since Katrina and Rita left their collective mark, but PAR President Jim Brandt says the issues raised by the new report remain as timely and relevant as ever. Moreover, that will likely remain true as long as the Gulf of Mexico presents a risk to residents and businesses. “If anything, they have become even more important as officials in communities devastated by hurricanes Gustav and Ike come face to face with many of the same bureaucratic obstacles, challenges and frustrations Louisiana and Mississippi officials have encountered since Katrina and Rita,” Brandt says.

At the heart of the misconceptions outlined in the report lies the problem of communication – meaning communications between different levels of government, between government and people, and between government and the media. The almost complete breakdown of communications in the days after Katrina has been well-reported and remains one reason why much of the relief work was delayed and rumors exploded. But even as relief efforts finally gave way to long-term rebuilding work, the communication problems continued, the report states. One example involves how “state and local officials struggled with the federal government’s one-size-fits-all recovery process.”

Efforts to convince federal officials of the need to view each community as a unique entity when it comes to disaster recovery have, for the most part, fallen on deaf ears, Brandt says. That, in turn, has made it much more difficult for local and state officials to convince Congress that the recovery will take many years and require more assistance from the federal government.

With the PAR's "GulfGov Reports" hurricane recovery research project nearing an end, this latest report departs from the format the project has followed since its inception, Brandt adds.

Specifically, it takes a step back to assess some of the wider implications of the rebuilding process through an examination of some of the continuing misconceptions. Some of the specific misconceptions outlined in the report include:

- The federal government has several programs in place from which it can distribute disaster aid money, but none of them is geared specifically toward catastrophic disasters. In addition, Congress created a program designed to help boost economic development recovery efforts in areas affected by Katrina and Rita, but it does not apply to other communities that have suffered disasters, and it is scheduled to end in 2010.
- There have been instances of fraud and abuse involving federal relief money but not to the degree feared by many, and federal, state, and local authorities have been aggressive in their efforts both to prevent fraud and to prosecute it.
- The Road Home Program has not succeeded in resolving the acute housing shortage Louisiana faces as a result of Katrina and Rita, nor has it produced a template that could be used to address housing issues created by future disasters.
- Certain segments of the Mississippi Gulf Coast have recovered, but more recovery work remains to be done.
- Hurricane Katrina was both a natural disaster and a man-made disaster for New Orleans.