Testimony before the United States Senate
Committee on Environment and Public Works and Subcommittee on Clean Air and Nuclear Safety

entitled

"Review of the Nuclear Emergency in Japan and Implications for the U.S."

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Introduction

Thank you Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman Boxer, Ranking Member Inhofe, Clean Air and Nuclear Safety Subcommittee Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Barrasso, and distinguished committee members.

I am Curtis Sommerhoff, Director of the Miami-Dade Department of Emergency Management, and am pleased to have the opportunity to share with you Miami-Dade's approach to preparedness, response and recovery, including our plans in the event of a radiological emergency. The events at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station have rightly focused attention on the safety of existing nuclear power plants, the soundness of emergency plans, and the readiness of emergency responders.

Let me begin by sharing a bit about myself and Miami-Dade County. I have spent my career in and around emergency management – from addressing water and wastewater emergencies… to overseeing hazardous materials and response programs… to managing Miami-Dade County's Radiological Emergency Preparedness Plan. I have served during 8 Presidentially Declared or Major Disaster Declarations, including Hurricanes Wilma and Katrina, and was appointed Director of Miami-Dade Emergency Management in 2009.

The community I serve spans nearly 2,000 square miles, includes 35 municipalities and has a population of more than 2.5 million people. We are a coastal community vulnerable to a number of natural and man-made disasters, including the threat of hurricanes, flooding, fires, mass migration, oil spills and radiological events.

Abilities & Strengths

Miami-Dade County's response to emergencies and disasters is guided by a Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan… an "all-hazards" approach which supports the county's ability to respond to any type of emergency. Within our comprehensive plan, we have a number of hazard specific annexes, including a Radiological Emergency Preparedness Plan.

The Turkey Point Power Plant operated by Florida Power and Light is located approximately 25 miles south of the City of Miami, and includes two nuclear power reactors. Miami-Dade County's vulnerability analysis accounts for the possible risks posed by nuclear power, and we have a robust planning, training and exercise program to ensure our response capabilities are appropriate.

Our plans are regularly assessed and assumptions analyzed, revised, and ultimately, certified by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Site visits and evaluated exercises bring together local, state and federal agencies, as well as members of the utility to enhance collaboration and programming. FEMA oversight and formal after-action reports highlight significant areas that might need improvement.

In the event of an emergency at the nuclear power plant, we have a public alert and notification system that includes warning sirens in the area around the plant; identified support facilities for the delivery of emergency services; fully trained and equipped public safety response personnel; and protective measures that are adjusted to the threat level.

Our ability to effectively respond to a radiological -- or other threat -- lies not only in our comprehensive planning, but our long history of implementing protective actions for the public. Over the past decade alone, evacuation orders have been issued to the public on 10 occasions as a result of hurricanes or tropical storms; and together with our partner agencies, we have coordinated the evacuation and transportation, sheltering, medical care and feeding of tens of thousands of evacuees.

Consider this: In the 10-mile Emergency Planning Zone surrounding the Turkey Point Nuclear Plant, there are approximately 180,000 residents. Within Miami-Dade's three designated Hurricane Evacuation Zones, there are more than a half a million residents.

We have identified shelters for temporary housing, with special consideration given to individuals with special needs. We have designated areas for the dissemination of emergency supplies like water, ice, food and tarps in the event of widespread destruction or power outages. We have ready-to-activate Disaster Assistance Centers to provide social services to residents in need of financial assistance, prescription refills, short and long-term housing and first aid; and contracts and mutual aid agreements to ensure the continuity of operations during disaster response and recovery. In line with the National Response Framework (NRF), all of our plans are scalable, flexible and adaptable.

The County's Department of Emergency Management fosters an ongoing, collaborative planning relationship with the county's mission essential departments and partner agencies to address life-safety and property implications from existing hazards. We have a long-established, state-of-the-art Emergency Operations Center – our nucleus for response and recovery efforts. When disaster threatens, our emergency managers, private and non-profit sector partners, as well as our media partners, come together

under one roof – a critical component for a coordinated response and timely and accurate information dissemination. Local, state and federal coordination enables us to augment and resupply personnel and equipment, as needed, even for extended periods.

Our strengths and experience from hurricane responses carry over to our ability to implement actions for a radiological event. Conversely, our planning for a potential radiological event has a positive effect on our ability to respond to other hazards.

Recommendations

Based on our experiences, we respectfully offer the following recommendations for consideration:

1) The recommendation by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to evacuate Americans out to 50 miles from the Fukushima Daiichi Plant has raised many questions. We support analysis of the data and assumptions behind the recommendation to determine if Emergency Planning Zones in the U.S. need to be revised. Of course, a wholesale change to increase the plume exposure pathway must be carefully evaluated and weighed against the value of making any revision.

   It is also important to note that local officials currently have the flexibility to revise public protective action based on accident parameters and the situation "on the ground".

2) As we have seen with the crisis in Japan as well as with other disasters across the U.S., interaction and coordination with federal partners is sometimes hampered by the lack of familiarity of local and state response organizations with federal processes and systems. Increasing the inclusion of FEMA and other federal agencies in local and state training and exercises would make the transition from a local response to a federally integrated response more seamless and efficient.

3) We support recent revisions to radiological emergency preparedness regulations requiring greater variation in exercise scenarios. Variations that are infrequently exercised at the local level, but carry great importance include consideration of food embargos, legal and financial challenges to home and business owners, long-term displacement of residents, impacts to the environment and economy, and integration of American Nuclear Insurers into the recovery process.

4) Because a nuclear event of Japan's magnitude invariably engenders a great deal of national and international interest, a centralized website similar to the Deepwater Horizon site "restorethegulf.gov" can provide a one-stop source for official information.

5) Finally, it is essential to maintain and expand emergency management all-hazard funding programs such as the Emergency Management Performance Grant Program (EMPG). This year alone, every EMPG dollar spent in Miami-Dade County is matched with over five local dollars to build emergency management capabilities that enhance our community's disaster preparedness.

   EMPG dollars have also enabled us to invest in staff and resources that have been made available to communities throughout the country, including assistance we were able to deploy to New York City in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, and more recently, to neighboring Florida counties directly impacted by 2004's record-breaking hurricane season.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to share our experiences, observations and recommendations. I am pleased to answer any questions you may have.