

Statement of

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Department of Homeland Security

Before the

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

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Good morning, Chairman Waxman, Representative Davis, and members of the Committee. My name is R. David Paulison, and I am the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). It is my pleasure to be here with you today to assure this committee that FEMA is taking responsible steps to address the concerns regarding the presence of formaldehyde in temporary housing units provided to disaster assistance applicants.

Historically FEMA has used manufactured housing (mobile homes) and travel trailers as a means of providing temporary housing to individuals who are displaced from their primary residences following a Presidentially declared disaster, but only when other forms of housing are not readily available. In the majority of disasters, housing needs are addressed through existing resources and FEMA's use of mobile homes or travel trailers is typically limited. This changed dramatically following hurricanes Katrina and Rita, as housing resources along the Gulf Coast were decimated. There were few alternatives to FEMA mobile homes and travel trailers. To address the need, FEMA provided over 120,000 mobile homes and travel trailers to individuals and families throughout the Gulf.

This was the largest emergency housing mission in our nation's history. Given decades of successful history of using mobile homes and smaller travel trailers to provide temporary housing, we had no reason to anticipate problems with the habitability of travel trailer units. Nevertheless, FEMA responded to the first reported concerns of formaldehyde fumes by a Gulf Coast travel trailer occupant in March 2006, and replaced the unit on March 19, 2006. FEMA continued to monitor the number of formaldehyde reports, and once they began to increase, the agency took this as an indication that this might be more than an isolated concern. FEMA began consulting with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) (including its Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR)), and the mobile home industry to gather information about the presence and effects of formaldehyde, in May 2006.