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Post-Katrina Promises Unfulfilled

On the Gulf Coast, Federal Recovery Effort Makes Halting Progress

By Spencer S. Hsu

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Nearly five months after Hurricane Katrina swamped New Orleans, President Bush's lofty promises to rebuild the Gulf Coast have been frustrated by bureaucratic failures and competing priorities, a review of events since the hurricane shows.

While the administration can claim some clear progress, Bush's ringing call from New Orleans's Jackson Square on Sept. 15 to "do what it takes" to make the city rise from the waters has not been matched by action, critics at multiple levels of government say, resulting in a record that is largely incomplete as Bush heads into next week's State of the Union address.

The problems include the slow federal cleanup of debris in Mississippi and Louisiana; a lack of authority for Bush's handpicked recovery coordinator, Donald E. Powell; the shortage and poor quality of housing for evacuees; and federal restrictions on reconstruction money and where coastal communities can rebuild.

With the onset of the hurricane season just four months away, there is no agreement on how to rebuild New Orleans, how to pay for that effort or even who is leading the cross-governmental partnership, according to elected leaders. While there is money to restore the city's flood defenses to protect against another Category 3 hurricane, it remains unclear whether merely reinforcing the levees will be enough to draw residents back.

New strains emerged this week when Bush aides rejected a plan by Rep. Richard H. Baker (R-La.) to set up a government corporation that would buy back the mortgages of storm-damaged homes around New Orleans. Instead, the government limited the use of \$6.2 billion in grants to the rebuilding of 20,000 homes destroyed outside federally insured flood zones.

Dismayed state and local officials said the president's approach does not provide help for an additional 185,000 destroyed homes. They warned that the federal government's halting recovery effort is undermining, at a critical juncture, the confidence of homeowners, insurers and investors about returning.

"They gave us a ladder to reach all of our housing needs, but the top rungs are missing," Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco (D) said in statement from Baton Rouge. "You can't fix a \$12 billion problem with \$6 billion."

Without a government mechanism to compensate homeowners and then clean up and repackage entire, devastated neighborhoods for developers, much of the city will never be rebuilt, Baker said.

Below are some of the major promises Bush made in his Jackson Square speech, and how the government has fared:

• *Housing.* Bush promised to empty shelters quickly, meet the immediate needs of the displaced, register victims, and provide housing aid in the form of rental assistance and trailers.

In Mississippi, 33,378 occupied trailers are meeting 89 percent of the estimated housing needs. But there have been 34,000 repair requests and maintenance complaints, according to Rep. Gene Taylor (D-Miss.).



David Bachemin was surprised to see a dead cat and a fishing boat in his Chalmette, La., neighborhood, which was damaged by Katrina. (By Michael Williamson -- The Washington Post)

Photos



New Orleans Now

Five months after Hurricane Katrina and one month before Mardi Gras, the city of New Orleans is slowly coming back. While Bourbon Street and the French Quarter are open for business and drawing crowds again, outlying areas are still struggling to survive.

In Focus

In Louisiana, trailers have been provided for about 37 percent of the estimated 90,000 displaced families in need of housing. Officials acknowledge production bottlenecks and in-state battles over sites. Trailer costs have swelled from \$19,000 to \$75,000 apiece.

[Parsing Bush's Gulf Coast Promises](#)

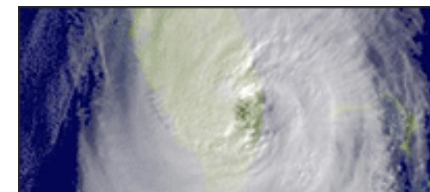
On Sept. 15, President Bush promised to "do what it takes" to lift the city from the waters. Following are some of the statements he made in the speech and the status of those goals.

Transcript

[President Bush Delivers Remarks on Gulf Coast Reconstruction](#)

Bush's speech from Jackson Square, in the French Quarter of New Orleans, on September 15, 2005.

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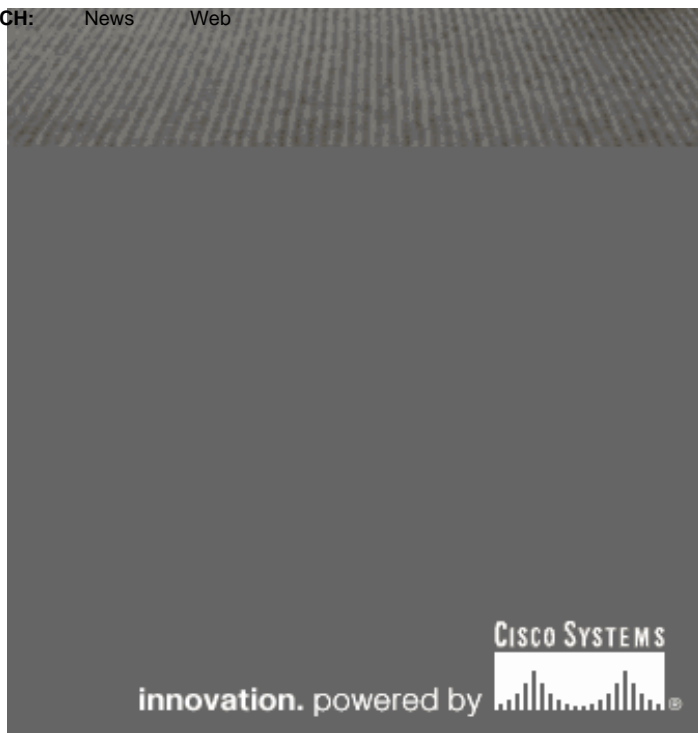


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