

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

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STATE OF ALABAMA

ADDRESS TO A JOINT SESSION OF THE ALABAMA LEGISLATURE
MAY 3, 2011
GOVERNOR ROBERT BENTLEY

Lt. Governor Ivey, Speaker Hubbard, President Marsh, Members of the Alabama Legislature, and my fellow Alabamians:

It is with a heavy heart, but a hopeful spirit that I speak to you tonight. The events of the last six days have been like none other in our state's history.

Several long-track tornadoes literally tore through the northern half of Alabama.

Ladies and Gentlemen, our state has never seen a natural disaster of this magnitude. The National Weather Service so far has confirmed that over 20 large tornadoes touched down last week. These tornadoes are rated EF3's EF4's and at least one F5.

Tonight, we grieve with the families of hundreds of people who lost their lives last week.

To the families of those who perished, let me say - we are praying for you, and I want you to know you are in our hearts as you go through this difficult time.

The tornadoes Wednesday did not discriminate by age, income, race or political party. The one thing all of the storm victims have in common - They are all Alabamians.

We all remember the morning of April 27th.

That morning I declared a State of Emergency for Alabama as the powerful storms approached our state. That evening I ordered the deployment of our Alabama National Guard.

The next morning my office established the Governor's Recovery Response Center and in order to help our citizens, we staffed it around the clock.

On that day, I and members of my Cabinet spread out across this state to respond to the needs of our citizens. And we will continue to be on the front lines until our state is completely rebuilt and every need has been met.

After witnessing the level of devastation first hand, I immediately called upon the President to provide the maximum level of assistance to Alabama.

In response to our request President Obama traveled to our state to see this destruction for himself. Two days later I met him in Tuscaloosa to review the damage. Traveling with him was FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate. I also asked the Administrator to make sure that we had every resource we need to respond to the greatest natural disaster to ever hit our state. I left that meeting and headed to Jefferson County, and I have not stopped visiting our people since.

And here's the result of all of our efforts working together: 36 counties so far have been approved for federal disaster assistance.

We have deployed over two thousand Alabama National Guardsmen. Every single request for their service has been met.

Today, the Federal Emergency Management Agency is on the ground in Alabama with its best personnel in disaster response. FEMA now has a Joint Field Office spread out over ten floors of a downtown Birmingham office building. And I have asked our Department of Industrial Relations to commit their resources to make sure it is Alabamians who are put to work in the recovery and rebuilding effort.

I am in daily contact with the FEMA leadership and they have assured me they are here for the long haul. We have held daily briefings each morning for the entire Legislature. We have done the same for our Cabinet, our congressional delegation and their staffs and we will continue to do so for all our elected leaders.

I had a conference call last night and invited all Mayors in affected areas to participate. And 43 were on the line. We will do the same this week for our County Commissioners. We will conduct these calls until every question is answered and every need of our citizens is met.

I have spent the last six days traveling to communities all over Alabama. I've seen for myself the utter devastation in towns large and small. And I've listened to families tell me of their tragedies.

And I can tell you I have never been more proud to be an Alabamian. Since this tragedy, we have seen the true character of our state. Alabamians care about one another. We take care of each other.

Our first responders – police, fire and rescue personnel – have worked around the clock from the first tornado of Wednesday morning to respond to the needs of our citizens.

Our Emergency Management Agency has worked constantly to respond quickly and effectively.

Our Alabama National Guard is working tirelessly to provide security and assist with transportation and distribution of aid.

Hospitals and our many health care providers have labored tirelessly to help the wounded heal.

Churches, synagogues other faith-based organizations are on the ground feeding and clothing those who have been left with almost nothing.

And ordinary citizens – men and women like you and me– have dropped everything to rush to the aid of their neighbors.

College students, senior citizens, parents and school children are all working side by side in our shelters and Recovery Centers.

And let's not forget the thousands of utility workers who have worked day and night to restore power to the citizens of our state.

I want to thank them for a job well done. And I ask you to join me in thanking each and every person in this state who has given of themselves to serve our fellow Alabamians.

Dianne and I had an opportunity to visit with some of the smallest of the storm victims at Children's Hospital in Birmingham. We talked with their parents and heard amazing stories of survival.

For many, they've lost every single thing - their homes, their loved-ones and in many cases their livelihood.

In Hackleburg, an entire town is leveled. Many lives were lost. And the community's largest employer is gone.

It's much the same in the opposite corner of Alabama in the town of Ider. Not only did families there lose their homes, they lost chicken houses – this is the only means they have for providing for their families.

The story repeats itself in town after town.

I have visited our hardest hit counties touched by the tornadoes. If I haven't been to your affected area yet– know this - I will be there soon.

We have spent much of the last six days in a rescue mode. And as much as we pray for additional survivors, we must now enter the recovery process. We will recover those loved ones who perished, with the dignity they deserve. And we will proceed through this lengthy process with care and respect.

The loss of life and property in this state is enormous. We have established a fund for the specific purpose of helping those with unmet needs. The Governor's Emergency Relief Fund will operate on an on-going basis, and will be used to fill in the gaps for Alabamians who have exhausted all other avenues of disaster relief, such as FEMA, Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and any other disaster relief programs.

Tomorrow morning, I will meet with executives from the four largest property insurance companies in the state. They represent nearly two-thirds of the insurance market in Alabama. I will thank them for their immediate response, but I will also challenge them keep the promises they've made to Alabama families.

It's important to move quickly during the recovery process.

But FEMA funds only cover a portion of the cost associated with debris removal. State and local governments share the rest. I know local governments have been struggling with how they will pay their share. To make sure there is no delay in getting this recovery and rebuilding process moving quickly, I have committed the state to pay the local government's share for 30 days.

I also ask our local governments to work with their local EMA officials to make sure the process is carried out correctly and effectively. It is imperative that our local governments follow the rules set forth by FEMA, so that the cost qualifies for payment.

If you were affected in any way by the tornadoes – you must call and register with FEMA. We need for you to call 1-800-621-3362. You must call now so that we may know your losses and the impact on our state. I'll say it again – call 1-800-621- FEMA.

We are beginning an unprecedented rebuilding effort in Alabama. Just like me, many of you in the Legislature have seen these communities. You live there; you've talked with the families face to face like I have.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we cannot – and we will not – let these people down. As leaders of this state, we will see that Alabama is rebuilt.

It is a daunting task, but I have no doubt that we are up to it. Now is the time to lead. There will be many things needed of us, but there are two immediate requests I make of this body tonight:

As many of you have seen first hand, 18 schools across our state sustained heavy damage. At least 5 schools are totally lost. Tonight I ask you to support emergency legislation to provide our State Superintendent of Education, Dr. Joe Morton, with flexibility to manage the challenges that lie ahead for our local school systems.

We also must pass our budgets.

I ask you to act upon that immediately and also pass any budget-supporting bills and our economic incentive legislation.

And let me ask one more thing of each member of the Alabama Legislature.

If you do not live in an affected district or if you have not witnessed for yourself the destruction – I challenge you to see it with your own eyes. I ask you to go to an affected area and see what I have seen. And ask the people who live there “How can I help you?”

I ask each one of you to follow the example set by our citizens, and follow the words of Isaiah which say:

“I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.”

The events of the last six days have been extraordinary. As we slowly emerge from the tragedy, I can tell you this - there is a spirit in this state unlike any I've seen before. The people of Alabama are strong and courageous – and our ability to do great things has no limits.

The road to recovery will be long and hard. But I will share that road with you, as it leads to a greater, stronger Alabama.

God bless you, and may God continue to bless the Great State of Alabama.

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