

**TESTIMONY OF**

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**BEFORE THE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON RAILROADS, PIPELINES, AND  
HAZARDOUS MATERIALS**

**OF THE**

**COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND  
INFRASTRUCTURE**

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Good morning, Madam Chairwoman and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this subcommittee. My name is Richard Phelps, and I am Amtrak's Vice President of Transportation. In this capacity, I am responsible for the operation of all Amtrak trains, a responsibility that would encompass the operation of evacuation trains from New Orleans. I would also like to thank Mayor Nagin for his city's hospitality and for hosting this field hearing. As you probably know, Amtrak began operations on May 1, 1971, and since that first day, New Orleans has been a stop on our system, with scheduled service to Washington, DC, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Memphis, and we have served it ever since.

Let me briefly outline Amtrak's plans for disaster relief in the region in the event of another hurricane. We have done some significant work with the Federal Emergency Management Agency on planning evacuations since Katrina, and Amtrak was under contract with FEMA for the 2007 hurricane season, which extended this year from June through November. This contract expired on November 30, 2007, and we will begin talks with FEMA this month about renewing it for the 2008 season. Therefore, any references I make to an evacuation plan refer to the plan we put together for the 2007 season. Evacuation plans are very complex, and the logistics of railroad transport aren't the only consideration.

We move the evacuees, but we must bring them to points where FEMA can arrange for shelter and feeding, and we can really only advise FEMA about the feasibility of rail evacuation to those points. One advantage of railroads is our ability to move large numbers of people at once, but it's important to remember that we can only move them on fixed lines. We need to keep this in mind as I discuss the logistics of an evacuation to Memphis, which was the destination we envisioned in our joint planning with FEMA in 2007.

I think it's important to start by setting out the conditions that are necessarily going to govern any evacuation effort. Because of the nature of hurricanes, we assumed we would have a relatively limited amount of time to implement our plan, and there are a couple of governing assumptions that I should explain before we get into the description of the actual plan. The first assumption is that Amtrak would receive its evacuation instructions from FEMA approximately 72 hours before the hurricane makes landfall; FEMA, of course, will issue these instructions at the request of the state of Louisiana. Landfall time would be determined by the National Weather Service. From this assumption flows another, and that is the timing of the individual parish levee boards' decisions to close the levee gates around New Orleans. In 2007, we assumed that the board would close the levee gates 12 hours before the hurricane's announced landfall time. Obviously, a lot

can happen, and we understand that it is possible the levee gates could actually be closed 24 hours before the announced landfall time, which would reduce the amount of time we have to conduct the evacuation from 60 hours to 48 hours. This would reduce the number of outbound trips trains can make, and lower the total number of evacuees we could carry.

All the rail lines out of New Orleans pass through levee gates, and some pass through multiple gates, so general gate closure will effectively seal the rail routes; any individual closure on a line with multiple gates like the Canadian National line to Memphis via Jackson (which passes through three sets of levee gates) would close the entire line to trains leaving Union Terminal. Because this would prevent further rail evacuation and leave equipment in the path of the oncoming storm, we would remove every piece of rolling stock that could roll from the city before the storm struck. This would have provided us with cars that could then have been used to transfer evacuees to other locations or to bring in additional responders for relief efforts. Equipment that was inside the city after the gates closed would be moved to high ground to limit water damage.

The first twenty-four hour period of our 2007 plan would be spent mobilizing and deploying personnel and equipment to New Orleans. Amtrak has designated

members of a “Rail Evacuation Team” (or “RET”) who would have deployed to New Orleans in that period to organize and prepare to receive the evacuees. To coordinate with the State evacuation planners, a “Mobile Command Center” bus would also have moved to Baton Rouge, to link up with the Louisiana Department of Transportation Emergency Operations Center so it could provide 24 hour liaison with Amtrak’s Central National Operations Center in Wilmington, Delaware. The team would have included Amtrak police and Emergency Preparedness employees who could provide 24 hour coverage of the State ESF-1 functions, which encompass emergency transportation and infrastructure operations.

All revenue service to and from New Orleans would have been suspended.

Individuals holding tickets on scheduled trains whose equipment was diverted to evacuation service would be given priority on those trains. Normal service from New Orleans would have been cancelled to allow equipment to be used in the evacuation. Inbound trains would have turned at major intermediate points.

Equipment currently in New Orleans would be used for evacuations, and we would bring in whatever additional equipment we deemed necessary. On any given day Amtrak has three trainsets in New Orleans for normal operations and they would have been pressed into service for evacuations.

Under our 2007 agreement, evacuation would have begun at New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal twenty-four hours after we received notification from FEMA, and several trains would have departed from New Orleans for Memphis over the next thirty-six hours. We planned our operations with an understanding that the situation would naturally be fluid, and I need to emphasize that it depended upon two key government decisions – FEMA’s notification to Amtrak, and the Federal Railway Administration’s notice to the railroads that the evacuation had begun, and that evacuation trains had priority.

On the map we have here, you will note that we have highlighted our normal services to and from New Orleans in black, and potential rail evacuation routes in red. When planning for an evacuation, we want to move people inland, and the two lines that physically offer the best evacuation routes out of New Orleans are the Kansas City Southern line to Baton Rouge and the Canadian National line to Memphis via Jackson. We would stay away from the coastal routes, since those would be vulnerable to disruption. Our 2007 planning was focused on an evacuation to Memphis, and I will discuss our plans in that regard. Once I have done so, I will come back to the issue of routes and destinations to offer some closing comments.

The evacuation to Memphis would have begun when the first train departed New Orleans twenty-four hours after we received the FEMA alert. This would have been an eight-hour trip over Canadian National rails, and it would be the first of four trips to Memphis, which could have collectively evacuated a total of 5,800 people. Amtrak's employees in New Orleans would have secured the station and departed on the last trains out of the city, bringing any unused emergency food and water supplies out with them. We would also have moved all of the defective and unserviceable equipment that could roll just after the last train departed. This would have required a waiver from the Federal Railway Administration.

To support our planned evacuation, Amtrak stocked a total of 18,000 emergency "snack pack" meals and 72,000 bottles of water at its commissary facility in New Orleans UPT to feed evacuees. We also created "go kits" for every participating engineer and conductor that included such vital items as rule books for the railroads over which we will be operating, portable radios and satellite phones, gloves, safety glasses, batteries, lanterns and switch keys. Operating crews assigned to the RET who would have operated trains were specially trained and qualified to operate over CN between the Amtrak terminal in New Orleans and Memphis, and employees were designated to man the team that would augment Amtrak work forces in New Orleans with 16 trained police members from our

police department and 32 customer service employees to ensure that the trains were properly stocked, and the evacuation was orderly and efficient.

Once the trains departed, our station in New Orleans would be available for use as a shelter. I think it's useful at this point to pull up our last chart, which summarizes the contributions Amtrak was prepared to make in 2007 in the event of a serious hurricane on the Gulf Coast. Some of those services are the subject of ongoing negotiations with FEMA, while others, such as the depot shelter, will be available as a result of compliance with local codes or agreements.

I think that describes the essentials of the plan we were prepared to execute. I don't yet know what the terms of a 2008 contract with FEMA will be. I would like to close by offering a couple of comments on the logistical difficulties involved in this. From an operational point of view, it's easiest to operate on the routes we normally use: our crews know them, the owning railroads are used to hosting passenger service, and they allow us to operate at useful speeds. Alternate routes such as Baton Rouge require more advance planning and coordination, and necessarily conducive to the desired operating speeds. Coastal routes are very vulnerable to weather damage, and we don't want to run trains over them during a hurricane. The best options for evacuation are inland routes that we operate on

daily, and it is for this reason that Jackson and Memphis are good destination points for evacuees.

All of us have learned a lot in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, but we have used that experience to build a good plan that will make a real difference in the face of an impending natural disaster. I think the plans we have arrived at are reasonable and, given that we have a number of trains positioned in New Orleans and crews trained to operate them over an evacuation route that hosts normal scheduled service, I think they're feasible. This concludes my testimony, and I will be happy to answer any questions you might have.