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Guest columnist

Katrina serves as a warning to mend the links between our agencies

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Amid the great sadness and disappointment I feel about the preparations and response of the federal government to the impacts of Katrina, I have been very impressed with the proactive stance of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Clearly, our federal government is capable of accurately forecasting disaster. The linkages between agencies need to improve, however, if these warnings are to be used to protect our lives and property.

Hurricane Katrina made landfall first in Florida on Aug. 26 and then again in Louisiana and Mississippi on Aug. 29. NOAA's National Weather Service published an assessment on Aug. 2, stating that the chance of above normal hurricane "expected activity" in 2005 is 95 percent to 100 percent. The weather service accurately assessed the emergency represented by Katrina, and issued warnings prior to each landfall. On Aug. 28, the weather service posted this advisory through New Orleans: "Devastating damage expected. a most powerful hurricane with unprecedented strength ... rivaling the intensity of Hurricane Camille of 1969."

NOAA then commandeered resources to assess damage of the coasts of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama within a short time. On the afternoon of Aug. 31, I happened to spot U.S. Navy Vice Adm. (Retired) Conrad Lautenbacher, the NOAA administrator, on a commercial flight from Washington, D.C., to Tampa. He was on his way to MacDill Air Force Base to board NOAA aircraft housed there. Within two days, NOAA's National Geodetic Survey had posted high-resolution airborne imagery covering New Orleans and adjacent areas on its Web site and through GoogleEarth. Our NASA and NOAA Earth-observing satellites also have been active, allowing us to view the area on a daily basis. We are now monitoring where the Mississippi River water goes as it enters the Gulf of Mexico.

NOAA has begun the daunting work with the region to assess the impact on coastal and marine ecosystems. U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez, on the advice of NOAA's National Marine fisheries Service, announced on Sept. 9 that the fishery of the Gulf of Mexico has failed due to Katrina. The areas affected include the Florida Keys

and from Pensacola to Texas. Florida's west coast is especially impacted because of the red tide that has plagued the region for upward of 10 months, killing millions of fish, invertebrates, birds, turtles and marine mammals.

The impact of Katrina on the fisheries, tourism and energy industries is serious. But this socioeconomic devastation is the result of an ecological disaster that highlights our dependence on the sea.

It is our responsibility to manage our activities intelligently, to quickly rebuild these coastal and marine ecosystems on which our commerce and health depend. Unfortunately, our government increasingly neglects environmental issues as part of a comprehensive homeland security strategy. This is a serious mistake. We need agencies actively and seriously engaged in securing the defense of our homeland, which includes protection and proper management of how we use our common resources.

The U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, in its 2004 report to the president, laid out a comprehensive blueprint for ocean governance. This included recommendations for economic stimulus and sensible management of our oceans through scientific knowledge. Among many problems and threats, the president's Ocean Commission highlighted hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico and flooding of New Orleans, with clear assessment of consequences like those we are witnessing now. It also pointed out that the 15 agencies that manage our ocean resources struggle to communicate with each other effectively.

Our administration is now making deep, unprecedented cuts in the nation's ocean science and management budgets. We need to change this strategy and implement the recommendations of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy if we are to have any hope to respond to future coastal crises in any intelligent way. Ignoring the national security threats identified by the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy is not an option.

The effort to assess the impact of Katrina is just starting. But there will be other Katrinas of many different kinds. Other agencies can learn something from NOAA and how it is carrying out its mission in the northern Gulf -- with foresight and a proactive stance. We also need strong linkages between our agencies and a robust national science infrastructure, for our executives to function properly on our behalf.

I hope our region sees a speedy recovery, and that we can plan better for the future using the lessons of the past.

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