

The Washington Post

Panel seeks ways to better cope with disasters

By CAIN BURDEAU

The Associated Press

Thursday, January 20, 2011; 8:19 PM

NEW ORLEANS -- Members of a committee of the National Academy of Sciences met Thursday in this hurricane-hit city, seeking input on ways to better prepare the nation for major disasters even before they occur and blunting the enormous toll afterward.

"We're in a new era of catastrophe," said Howard C. Kunreuther, one of the 13-member committee and a professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. "We are facing losses that are far, far greater than what we've had in the past."

The committee said it wants to better equip all levels of government and society at large for extreme events in the future. Its recommendations are expected to be delivered in a study next year to Congress and the president, its work was commissioned by several federal agencies.

Kunreuther said U.S. disaster losses have steadily risen over decades. He cited data showing that between 1950 and 1959 there were about \$53 billion in damages from catastrophes and between 1990 and 1999 damages had increased to \$778 billion. Losses were calculated by the Munich Re Group, an international insurer that tracks catastrophes and reinsures others.

New Orleans was the panel's first meeting venue outside Washington.

On Thursday, the committee heard from officials, nonprofit workers and experts who recounted efforts to cope with Gulf Coast devastation from Hurricane Katrina, which flooded much of New Orleans after floodwaters breached levees in August 2005.

The committee plans later meetings in Iowa, scene of the major Cedar Rapids flooding in 2008, and southern California, a region prone to periodic droughts, wild fires and earthquakes.

The panel said it is examining the benefits of better building codes, restructuring insurance to encourage people to live in safer places and other preventative steps even before disaster strikes.

"We're trying to learn lessons and the best practices," said Susan Cutter, the committee's chairwoman and director of the Hazards & Vulnerability Research Institute at the University of South Carolina. "We have people building in places where they shouldn't be and we have governments that allow people to build in places where they shouldn't."

Katrina caused about \$125 billion in damages, claimed more than 1,600 lives and led critics to blast what they saw as the confused, slow federal response in the chaotic first days after the storm. Officials say Katrina marked a wakeup call for emergency planners to be better prepare for future disasters.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/20/AR2011012005686.html>