

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, my name is Natalie Jayroe and I am the President and CEO of Second Harvest Food Bank of Greater New Orleans and Acadiana. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

For more than seventeen years I have been involved in food banking, first as a volunteer and founder of feeding programs and for the last 14 years as the chief professional officer of the organization. Having worked in disaster prone areas my entire career (Savannah, San Diego, Baton Rouge and New Orleans), disaster preparedness and response have always been a part of the mission that we plan and train for while being responsible for the distribution of USDA TEFAP commodities on a daily basis. In Louisiana, over the last two years the five food banks of the Louisiana Food Bank Association have strengthened their relationship with the Governor, the Louisiana Commissioner of Agriculture, and the state legislature. Together we have developed a model for public/private partnership that in FY2008 allowed food banks to purchase almost 10 million pounds food from Louisiana farmers, fisherman and vendors to distribute to people in need throughout all 64 parishes. We have a very good working relationship with USDA and FEMA regionally and nationally.

The expertise of the nonprofit food banking system has been called upon for critical support during all of the major disasters our country has faced over the last two decades. Our grassroots responsiveness and flexibility allow us to fill the inevitable gaps in food supplies and mobilize resources quickly to respond to urgent needs.

During the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita TEFAP commodities were released for disaster distribution. In my opinion many lives were saved as a result of this quick action. As a consequence of receiving these commodities together with the food provided through the Feeding America network, Second Harvest Food Bank of Greater New Orleans and Acadiana became the largest food bank in history overnight, distributing 8 million pounds of food in September 2005 alone. Since that time, Second Harvest has distributed more than 90 million pounds of food to more than a quarter of a million individuals in its 23 Parish south Louisiana service area.

Some time later, the members of the Food Bank Association in Louisiana learned that large scale distribution of foods to households would not be possible in future disasters. The reason given was that the distribution after the Hurricanes of 2005 was seen as inconsistent with federal law. The federal policy in question relates to concerns about preventing duplication of benefits between food stamps and household commodities in providing emergency food assistance to victims of disasters. This policy, as it is currently interpreted, impedes our ability to respond to disaster victims while they are waiting to receive assistance through the food stamp program and needs to be reconsidered.

Last year, the increase in food and fuel costs along with the decrease in USDA commodities available to food banks left many of the more than 200 Feeding America members seriously short of food. For instance, the 7 million pounds of USDA TEFAP commodities distributed by Second Harvest in 2004 dropped to 2.7 million pounds in fiscal year 2008. The number of people needing food through the 246 faith-based and nonprofit member agencies that our food bank supports has been steadily increasing as

families struggle to make ends meet, children go to school too hungry to learn and seniors have to choose between medicines, food and utilities. The successful passage of the Farm Bill last year has greatly improved the supply of TEFAP commodities to food banks, and I would like to thank Senators Harkin, Landrieu and other members of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees for your leadership of that effort.

Second Harvest Food Bank of Greater New Orleans and Acadiana has also developed a mutually beneficial relationship with FEMA, the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and the New Orleans Office of Homeland Security. Second Harvest currently stores the MREs pre-positioned for first responders in our New Orleans and Lafayette warehouses. As these MREs approach their expiration date, they are released into our food bank system for distribution to faith-based and nonprofit member agencies. We are also in discussion with the CDC about our role in response to a pandemic event as part of the City Readiness Initiative.

Prior to Hurricane Gustav making landfall and in the immediate aftermath, we sought to first pre-position disaster foods and later order replacements for the depleted warehouses at the food banks in south Louisiana. Finally, after working through a number of procedural glitches with the help of the Governor, FNS regional office and state agencies, we were able to order food for disaster distribution. We were grateful for the supplies that we received. However, with the beginning of a disaster food stamp program, further orders were not processed.

The system set up to distribute emergency food stamps was immediately overwhelmed by the number of people who needed relief. Governor Jindal has taken quick and effective action to correct the deficiencies of the emergency food stamp enrollment process. However, as of the date of this testimony, people are still lining up to receive benefits. In a disaster of this scale, we need to be able to provide federal commodities along with privately donated foods to hungry people to tide them over until their food stamp benefits become available.

By this time Hurricane Ike was passing through the Gulf of Mexico on its way to landfall in Texas on September 13. Shelters in Alexandria, Shreveport and Monroe were filling again. The storm surge that hit the south Louisiana coast caused flooding in lower Jefferson, Terrebonne and Plaquemines parishes. Lafourche, Iberia and St. Mary parishes were hit again. Cameron and Calcasieu were once again under water. All coastal Louisiana parishes experienced worse damage than they did with Hurricane Rita. Parish presidents, such as Aaron Broussard of Jefferson parish, called Second Harvest for help as communities in the lower part of Jefferson had no power, no food, no Red Cross feeding sites and overwhelmed PODs. Second Harvest's trucks were stopped by the National Guard outside of Morgan City because the Guard did not feel it was safe for nonprofits to distribute food.

Of the 1.8 million pounds of food that Second Harvest Food Bank of Greater New Orleans and Acadiana has distributed from September 1 to September 19, 175,000 pounds have come from the DSS/FEMA/USDA pipeline. Additional commodities would

enable us to maintain our distribution rate of over 100,000 pounds per day during the next four weeks of immediate recovery. In the first two weeks of September we distributed food to more than 162 agencies, 25 of which were disaster distribution points such as the City Halls in Lafitte and LaPlace, the parish governments in Lafourche and Terrebonne, and the United Ways of Acadiana in Lafayette and Southwest Louisiana in Lake Charles. Second Harvest was the first nonprofit to stage food in these parishes, followed by and in close collaboration with the Salvation Army. The food is still needed.

In major disasters, the food banks do not have the capacity to replace government response. The removal of the restrictions that currently limit and slow the distribution of USDA commodities to food banks and other emergency feeding organizations would significantly improve the availability of critically needed food and water in the days immediately following a catastrophic event. Assistance to build infrastructure and funding to help defray the rising costs of fuel could make the Feeding America network an even stronger partner of USDA and FEMA.

I have several recommendations I would ask you to consider.

- Provide the resources and authority needed by USDA and FEMA to purchase foods needed in disaster response. Such resources would enable USDA to maintain inventories of food in the packaging that is needed in response to major disasters.
- Eliminate legal barriers to prestaging food, both in areas that are providing shelter for people leaving a disaster area and in Parishes directly impacted by the disaster.
- Ensure that there is enough logistical support to get the food into areas cut off by water; for instance we were not able to get food into lower Plaquemines after Hurricane Ike because there was no transportation available to get across the four foot storm surge covering the roads.
- Improve the ARF process to bring more flexibility to the type of products that are made available, and the nonprofits that distribute them. For instance, one food bank request was denied because the Red Cross had the super ARF, and we could not utilize number 10 cans for household distribution.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is to make sure that the emergency food response system has as its primary focus getting assistance to people as efficiently and effectively as possible, and making concerns about avoiding duplication a secondary consideration.

Thank you for allowing me to speak before you today. Second Harvest Food Bank of Greater New Orleans and Acadiana and the food banks of the Feeding America network are privileged to be partners with the USDA and FEMA in disaster response, and the everyday economic emergencies that people face. I firmly believe that by working together we can continue to make progress in ensuring that all people have access to nutritious food.