FIRST RESPONSE BROADCASTERS ACT

Ms. LANDRIEU. Mr. President, I rise today not to speak about the Iraq war or the supplemental, which has been the focus of this morning’s debate. I will return to the floor later to speak on both of those subjects. I wanted to take some time this morning to talk about a bill that I had some time, to speak about a bill I intend to introduce later this week with my cochair, the ranking member of our new Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery, Senator Ted STEVENS from Alaska, and other members of my subcommittee. Senators CARPER and Pryor, as we begin to lay down pieces of legislation that are apparent and necessary to improve the general disaster response for this country, which has been found to be severely lacking.

The bill I will introduce later today is called the First Response Broadcasters Act. It is a piece of legislation, as I said, I will be filing with other members of the Senate.

As my State continues to rebuild out of the rubble and destruction and devastation of the first and third worst natural disasters to hit the country, and the subsequent levee breaks that filled up a major American city within 24 hours and continues to wreak havoc on the people in the appropriate order. To receive an alert in Mississippi, Texas, Florida, and other key facilities.

With phone lines down, cell phones out, and streets too flooded to move around to get any kind of perspective about what was actually happening, and where the 4 to 20 feet of water was coming from, when we had never seen anything like that in the history of our city, the sound of local radio and television stations was what hundreds of thousands of my constituents relied on. It was the only voice for them in the first minutes and nights, and it continued for weeks and months. Actually, Mr. President, it continues to this day. And because of the credibility of our local broadcasters at a time when the public needed them, they were there. Our local broadcasters provided lifesaving information.

As you will recall, we have lost over 1,000 lives in Louisiana and over 200 lives in Mississippi. But many lives, I am convinced, were saved because broadcasters, having lost their own stations—what they had their own homes, and with their own loved ones missing, stayed on the job. More importantly, they stayed on the air so the reporters could report what was happening, and even those of us in powerful positions could get a better handle on the situation.

As local radio and television stations stand up, as so many did, and put commercial interests aside to serve the public interest, the Federal Government, in my opinion, should be ready to stand up with them. That is what this bill is about. It is not a long or complicated bill. It really doesn’t cost much. It will have a major impact as this Nation tries to fashion better responses for our country. We are in desperate need of new tools, new tool boxes, and this is one of them.

In fact, for more than 50 years, we have required local broadcasters to be at the front line of sounding the alarm in a disaster. With the entire industry dependent upon public airwaves, broadcasters have a responsibility to the public. We are in desperate need of new tools, new tool boxes, and this is one of them.

This is why stations today are required by law to be part of the emergency alert system. At the system’s core are 34 primary entry points, radio stations with direct lines from emergency command centers in Washington and in their State. But half of our States don’t even have these entry points. To receive an alert in Mississippi, for example, you needed to rely on the message being passed on from station to station from an entry point in Louisiana.

One of the several things this bill does is add primary entry points to every underserved State and region to make sure every State has an equal chance to be well prepared when disaster strikes and to try to put their best assets forward. I have heard from many of our broadcasters after the hurricanes who said they themselves were first responders, and in their Senator’s view, extremely important first responders.

I am extremely pleased to have Senator STEVENS join me. This is a bipartisan bill. It is not complicated, it is rather simple, but critical as we begin to stand up a better disaster response this country is certainly most worthy of. The people of Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Florida, and other parts of the country are still suffering from broadcasters that lost theirs, in minutes, sometimes in a few hours, dash the hopes and dreams of millions of Americans.

We cannot prevent tornadoes. We cannot prevent floods. We cannot prevent earthquakes. We cannot prevent hurricanes. We cannot prevent earthquakes. We can do a better job of predicting them. But the most important thing we can do is to warn people and help people deal with these terrible tragedies that come their way.

In this Senator’s view, we have a lot of work to do. I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. SUNUNU. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be suspended.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.