
Interview: Mark Ghilarducci

Disaster Preparedness and Response 'Dis-coordinated,' Unfunded Since 9/11

Mark Ghilarducci, currently the Vice President and Director of the Western States Regional Office of James Lee Witt Associates, has 25 years of service in emergency management, fire, emergency medical services, and rescue disciplines. He is also the former Deputy Director of the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services, appointed by then-Governor Gray Davis, with responsibilities for statewide Emergency Operations and Public Safety, Planning, and Training. Prior to that he served as a Federal Coordinating Officer with the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), where, appointed by then-President Clinton, he directed and coordinated Federal response and recovery operations after the declaration of major disasters and emergencies.



Ghilarducci has a wide-range of expertise, including operations of earthquake recovery, urban search and rescue, swiftwater and flood rescue, and emergency medical services, among others. He was one of ten individuals chosen to train local and state officials in terrorism preparedness, strategy, response, and recovery for the U.S. Departments of Defense and Justice under the Nunn-Lugar-Domenici anti-terrorism programs.

Ghilarducci was interviewed on Aug. 31 by Mary Jane Freeman.

EIR: An Aug. 2, 2005 press release of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) states that a “95% to 100% chance of an above-normal 2005 Atlantic hurricane season” will occur, based on their data and analysis. It goes on: “Therefore, for the remainder of the season, we expect an additional 11-14 tropical storms, with 7-9 becoming hurricanes, and 3-5 of these becoming major hurricanes. . . . Given the forecast that the remainder of the season will be very active, it is imperative that residents and government officials in hurricane-vulnerable communities have a hurricane pre-

paredness plan in place.” What concerns *EIR* is the lack of pre-planning, given how much forewarning there was with respect to this hurricane.

Ghilarducci: Just before James Lee Witt left office as director of FEMA, he had started several initiatives, including Project Impact, a lot of mitigation type efforts—but, in particular, one he called “Catastrophic Disaster Planning.” He identified four or five key areas in the country, and four or five key hazard-types to really look at catastrophic disasters, very much like what we are seeing with Hurricane Katrina. The idea was to look at an unprecedented event that would displace a couple of million people, with long-term housing issues, public health issues, infrastructure collapse. You actually have to bring in, as we did after World War II, a Marshall Plan, to be able to reconstruct and recover in a timely enough fashion that would exceed our day-to-day disaster management policies and the Stafford Act.

One of these situations was a catastrophic level 8 earthquake in the Los Angeles basin, which we know is absolutely going to happen and would be devastating. I was very much involved in that one, because at the time I was deputy director of the Office of Emergency Services in California. There was a great partnership in the preparedness planning team at FEMA, and the state and local governments, in launching this endeavor. The other two types of disasters were a terrorist attack of major proportions and a category 4-5 hurricane that would hit New Orleans. So, they’ve been thinking about this for some time.

EIR: When you say some time, what period was this catastrophic disaster planning being done?

Ghilarducci: They had been working on plans for a number of years associated with this. But it was really not until late in 1999-2000, when they really began this effort of catastrophic disaster planning. Witt foresaw and understood, I believe, that we were going to get whacked by something as big as Hurricane Andrew, that occurred in 1992, or bigger at some point, and therefore that we really needed to put our effort forward to prepare for that.

EIR: When you say “they” were planning, do you mean the U.S. government?



DoD/Petty Officer 2nd Class NyxoLyno Cangemi

U.S. Coast Guard Petty Officer 2nd Class Shawn Beaty surveys rooftops in New Orleans Aug. 30, looking for survivors. Pre-disaster mitigation efforts for such a catastrophe were “done away with,” Ghilarducci says, when Homeland Security superseded FEMA.

Ghilarducci: Yes. FEMA was showing leadership and an intent to do this. And they were actually putting money behind this, which is critical. Right? . . .

So there was this effort and they did some exercising of the plans. Well, between the time Witt left office and the time the Bush Administration took hold, and Joe Allbaugh became FEMA director, there were a lot of changes made. The emphasis on mitigation was minimized, and, in fact, pre-disaster mitigation was almost done away with. The effort for these catastrophic disaster planning initiatives—one of the disasters being the one we just saw—stopped. Then 9/11 happened, and the entire pendulum swung so far to the other side, that everything was focussed—in fact, the entire Federal government was changed, reorganized—to deal with the threat of terrorism.

So, this concern—with which I, by the way, agree, that there is, and should be, a concern for a second massive terrorist attack, and we need to be ready for that. But I don’t agree that it should be done at the expense of all the other kinds of disaster threats or risk that we face, and will see time and time again. Just think: since 9/11 we’ve probably seen, what five, six, seven, eight major hurricanes, four major earthquakes, and a tsunami in South East Asia that was unprecedented. I will tell you, the tsunami incident alone, if you look at it, the U.S. government needs to stand up and take notice of what happened in Southeast Asia, instead of saying “well, that was over there.”

EIR: *EIR* wrote at the time that the U.S. government should

have played a much more active pre-event role in the developing tsunami.

Ghilarducci: There’s no question about that; we could get into the United Nations and the State Department. But my point is that the California coastline, which is one of the economic engines for this country, Washington state, Alaska, down to Mexico, are all very vulnerable for tsunamis, and there has been, literally “spit” given to tsunami planning. Here [in Southeast Asia], you’ve got 180-200,000 people killed, we learned more about tsunamis than we ever have in the history of mankind, and what have we done since then? Nothing.

So, it is hard for me to believe how genuine Homeland Security is when they say, “it is better that preparedness come under a different section, splitting preparedness out of FEMA. It’s no big deal, we’re all one big agency.” You know what? If there was an intent for mitigation, an intent for maintaining the existing emergency management system—which by the way worked very well before 9/11 and was the thing that worked *after* 9/11, okay—but they dismantled it. When, really, what the failure was there had to do with detection and deterrence; it was an intelligence failure. It is just unclear to me, of the whole effort that’s been undertaken, that they’ve basically thrown the baby out with the bath water, using the rationale that “we’re going to be more coordinated.”

And I’ve got to tell you, we are *less* coordinated today than we ever were before 9/11. And this whole aspect of “all hazard response and recovery” and planning—because if you look at the emergency management cycle, it is a cycle. You

know, there's pre-event mitigation, planning, and preparedness, and then there's the response and recovery/reconstruction, and then after the event, you learn from what was learned, and you plug those lessons learned into the new mitigation strategies. Then the cycle begins again. I submit to you, that that cycle has been disrupted by the way we have approached the whole issue of our national emergency response capabilities.

EIR: Would you say that the first two elements of this cycle, have been eliminated?

Ghilarducci: Well, in some areas they've been eliminated. In all areas, they have been diminished to the point that they are—you know, you can make whatever program anemic until it becomes non-functional.

You mentioned the Army Corps of Engineers; that's a good example. You talk about anemia. You can anemia-ize an organization to the point where it is nonfunctional. The pre-disaster mitigation aspect, the whole Project Impact concept of getting communities to take responsibility for making themselves more disaster-resistant, so that in the long run, when these disasters occur, the impact is less, the economic impact is less, the ability to have business continuity is greater, and the response and the cost of the response is minimal, because people have taken an interest, an effort, at the local and state level to prepare.

But in reality, since Homeland Security has come in, almost 100% of the money, and 100% of the effort is being pushed towards terrorism preparedness.

EIR: Let me ask you about something in Eric Holdeman's op ed Aug. 30, "Destroying FEMA" [see p. 7]. He said that this year it was announced that FEMA is to officially lose the disaster preparedness function, and that FEMA employees have been directed not to become involved in disaster preparedness functions. Is there truth to that, and if so, is there a directive issued?

Ghilarducci: Yes, you know when I saw that in Eric's piece I did not know that. But he's on the ground and dealing face to face with FEMA all the time, and he's worked very closely with all these folks for many, many years. He's a big proponent of mitigation, so he's worked with the preparedness side. If he says that, then he knows something that I personally don't know, but I believe him.

EIR: I just heard a DOD briefing on what they are *now* mobilizing. It struck me, in light of the NOAA Aug. 2 release, that there could have been more done pre-event. What is your thought on that?

Ghilarducci: Did I mention to you the catastrophic planning initiative?

EIR: Yes, that it had been under way, in four or five areas, the Los Angeles basin, Louisiana.

Ghilarducci: Right. So I'd say to you that there had been planning taking place. So the question is, how much is that planning sustained, and how much emphasis was being put on it? If you look at the larger context, of all hazard planning overall, and you look at the fact that since 9/11, the Federal government, FEMA, or the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), actually, has reduced the amount of funds available for planning, other than terrorist events. . . .

EIR: Do you know by how much?

Ghilarducci: The figures are high, but I can't tell you right now, because I don't have them in front of me, and it would be speculation on my part to give you figures off the top of my head. But I can tell you, as a former state official, it was very complicated for us. For example, in what we call the EMPG, emergency management program grant funds that are given to state and local governments for supporting their planning division—that is, the sections of their organizations that do the planning—was cut considerably. And, whatever money was moved over to Homeland Security that came through the EMPG program, the states were told, that money has to be spent on terrorism planning. So what happened is that you see all these state and local officials spending a majority of their time working on terrorism preparedness. Where they can squeak out disaster planning and other hazards, they did it. But for the most part, it is all directed to terrorism. You will see that throughout the country.

EIR: When did that begin?

Ghilarducci: That was within a year following 9/11 and all the changes that had been made. This happened along with recommendations to governors to appoint homeland security directors at the state level, and set up a sort of collateral communications system that would go from Department of Homeland Security to state homeland security directors. Thereby they set up a dynamic where there are people who have information, and people who don't have information—specifically, this means your emergency management directors and those people who have to deal with the management of consequences of these events. So strife began to develop and what happened is, it created animosities, and it created a system that was once-coordinated, based on relationships and procedures and policies, and it made it somewhat dis-coordinated.

EIR: In the situation that we face in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama today, my question is: Who is coordinating? Especially, as when the President held a late afternoon press conference on Wednesday Aug. 31—three days *after* Katrina hit—to declare he's *now* doing some things. But the coordination issue is uppermost in my mind, as to how it could possibly be functioning.

Ghilarducci: Well, remember that the Federal government is supposed to be in support of state and local government.



DoD/Airman Jeremy L. Grisham, U.S. Navy

A National Guard utility truck makes its way through floodwaters to bring supplies to the Super Dome in New Orleans, Aug. 31. "We are less coordinated today than we ever were before 9/11," Ghilarducci states.

All disasters *are* local events. So the local authorities need to be on the ball to be able to respond. So, they must have the resources, the training, etc., to respond to these types of things, and the personnel. That is all supported by the state and by the Federal government.

But it is interesting that today, three days into the event, I guess, it was Secretary Chertoff who announced that this was an incident of national significance. Well, I probably could have told you that it is an incident of national significance *before* it hit! Not to be Monday-morning quarterbacking, but there is now a hierarchy that you have to go through, where once, I think, the FEMA of yesterday could have been much more nimble, and able to respond. They would have been tied-in with the preparedness activities on the front end, known what to expect, and been able to hit the ground running with the local authorities. When I say that, I mean building the capacity or providing capacity that would support, and truly support, the state and local efforts.

EIR: Right, that was what I was getting at, the building of the capacity, knowing that you don't have to mobilize your Naval hospital ships today and expect them to show up ten days later, and this is already three days into the event.

Ghilarducci: Exactly.

EIR: That is why I started this interview by reading the Aug. 2 NOAA hurricane advisory, which certainly was known, and knowable. Even the week before Katrina hit, there were numerous warnings about how it was time to start evacuating.

Ghilarducci: Yes. Well, I think the argument Homeland

Security has always made was that all of this "new way of doing business," all of this dismantling the existing system, and re-creating a new system, was going to streamline all this. And really it has not streamlined it. We are still three days into their making a decision, "hey, this is a big deal," and then waiting ten days for the cavalry to show up.

Again, I may have mentioned this earlier, but this is a level of frustration, more than criticism. I mean, everybody has a different way of doing business. But, all I'm saying, is that when you look at the way things were operating from the consequence-management side, and you look at what happened in 9/11, and you look at past disasters and the way we've been able to respond, and then from the pre-disaster mitigation effort—and you see where we are at today, I don't see the argument for the justification that Homeland Security is making to dismantle what existed and

re-create something new.

I'm open. I've been open now since 2001 to try to understand this, but none of this is logical to me, except to say that with better coordination, people would be able to do their jobs better, and we need to do this for national security. It's not working. It is more dis-coordinated than coordinated, more stovepipes now than before.

EIR: So, then this is as Holdeman put in his op-ed, a "systematic" downgrading of FEMA in terms of the way DHS has structured it?

Ghilarducci: No question. I agree with that. They would argue otherwise. They argue it is being enhanced. But let's see what happens in the response to hurricane Katrina. I mean, I saw what happened in the response to the five hurricanes that were back-to-back in Florida. Others can see that too. There were criticisms, and there was a lot that was sort of pushed down so well that you never heard about. But the fact of the matter is, that there are still people, after all this time, with blue tarps on their roofs, people who are unemployed because of the disaster, and infrastructure that has not been replaced.

EIR: But there is no budget for infrastructure under this Administration. Given how many people are unemployed today in this country and around the world, it is criminal that we are not rebuilding our cities and industries. It is a sad state of affairs.

Ghilarducci: Yes, I know. I think that has a greater impact on national security than anything else.