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Governor



State of North Carolina
Office of the Governor

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**GOV. EASLEY'S TESTIMONY TO THE COMMISSION ON
NATIONAL GUARD AND RESERVES**

The following is the prepared text of North Carolina Gov. Mike Easley's remarks to the Commission on National Guard and Reserve in Washington, D.C., for delivery at 12:45 p.m. Thursday June 15, 2006.

Thank you Chairman Punaro and members of the commission for the opportunity to speak to you today. I am here in two capacities. First, I am here as the governor of North Carolina, a state recognized as one of the most military friendly in the country.

Second, I am here in my capacity as the chair on National Guard issues for the National Governors' Association. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you, wearing both these hats, to let you know how important the Guard and Reserves are to homeland security and homeland defense, as well as the critical role these units play in emergency preparedness and disaster response efforts at the state level.

North Carolina is home to more than 101,000 active-duty military personnel at Fort Bragg, Pope Air Force Base, Camp Lejeune Marine Corps Base, Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, the U.S. Coast Guard Air Station at Elizabeth City and Marine Corps Air Station and Naval Air Depot at Cherry Point. They are supported by another 17,000 civilians. North Carolina has 164 Army and Air Guard units, nearly 12,000 members strong.

In North Carolina and in many other states, there is strong community support for our active and reserve-duty soldiers. And I am proud to say North Carolina is a model for other states in serving our National Guard families.

Our Citizen Soldier Support Program is a first-of-its-kind effort to help these families deal with the challenges, demands and risks of extended deployment. The program mobilizes existing community and faith-based organizations to strengthen support for National Guard and Reserve families dealing with schools, parenting and other challenges faced by spouses and children when family members are deployed or return from active duty.

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Since September 11, 2001, these 12,000 members of the N.C. National Guard have proven themselves at home and abroad. More than 10,000 of the state's Guard have been mobilized in operations Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom and Noble Eagle. During the same time, more than 3,800 have been called to duty to support civil authorities responding to hurricanes, floods, ice storms and other disasters.

The National Guard units in the states are committed to the national defense and the role they play in keeping our country secure. They are equally committed, and, I believe all governors would agree, essential, in keeping our communities safe when called upon in response to natural and manmade disasters.

When Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf coast of Louisiana and Mississippi, the Guard made up more than 90 percent of the on-the-ground response personnel. Shortly after Katrina's rains subsided, North Carolina's Guard dispatched its Quick Reaction Force to Louisiana. In the months after the disaster hit the Gulf, North Carolina sent 900 members of the Guard to assist the region in its recovery, serving at hospitals, distributing emergency supplies and patrolling neighborhoods.

In North Carolina, during the ice storms that blanketed our state in 2002, 2003 and 2004, Guard personnel, in addition to their typical emergency response duties, went door-to-door in many of our rural communities to check on residents that were without power. They also worked during power outages to direct traffic, rescue stranded motorists and provide emergency power.

During Hurricane Isabel in 2003, our Guard troops were on duty when flood waters rose around the isolated coastal town of Harlowe. The Guard evacuated more than 130 trapped residents to safety.

When Hurricane Frances soaked the western areas of the state in September 2004, residents escaping flood waters, stranded in trees and on top of cars, were rescued by chopper crews from the 126th Aviation Regiment based in Salisbury.

Without the assistance of the Guard in these cases, there would have been significant loss of life in North Carolina.

The dual role of the Guard will continue. But for the Guard to continue to be successful, in both national and homeland defense missions, we must ensure that it is properly staffed, adequately funded and fully equipped.

Five North Carolina National Guard soldiers have lost their lives in Iraq. Their sacrifice to their communities, their state and their country require this commitment from the federal government.

In two instances it appears that logic has been turned on its head. First, the Department of Defense is asking Congress to realign the forces of the National Guard but they have not yet defined the long-term role of the Guard in the federal warfight and homeland security. Secondly, the cuts indicate that the national military strategy is being set to meet the needs of the budget when the reverse should be the case and the budget should be designed to execute the national military strategy to ensure the security of our people.

As I am sure you are well aware, the nation's governors are a diverse group and often have conflicting views and interests. However, I can tell you without a doubt that there is rare unity when it comes to the Guard. The governors of all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands adamantly oppose the President's proposal to reduce the Guard forces. I have been serving as governor for more than five years and I have never seen such unanimous support come together so quickly, in less than three days, on one particular issue. In just three days we had a bipartisan agreement to send a letter to the President opposing his recommendation.

We are also opposed to a restructuring of the Guard which would replace combat brigades with combat support and combat service support units. The combat brigade units are the most versatile. They have the skill and equipment necessary to respond immediately to many different types of events, be they manmade or natural disasters. The combat support and service support units are specialized and require training. This training would take time that we do not have when responding to an emergency situation like the flooding from Hurricane Floyd that left most of Eastern North Carolina under water.

Such realignment would result in a significant loss of emergency response and recovery capabilities. It would impair the ability of governors to move quickly in the case of disaster events.

The president and Congress must also carefully consider the consequences of expanding the missions of the National Guard. When called upon to take on new or expanded duties, such as patrolling our nation's borders, those units are not available for emergency missions in the unfortunate event of disasters, natural or manmade.

In addition to personnel, the Guard must have the equipment necessary to do their jobs. A surgeon cannot operate without a scalpel. A pilot cannot fly without a plane. A Guard unit cannot be effective without the right tools.

Prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks, National Guard units had about 74 percent of the equipment needed to fulfill its missions. Today, according to the most recent information from the General Accountability Office, (GAO), Army National Guard units have less than 34 percent of equipment for its mission. While some hurricane-prone states, such as North Carolina, are getting some accelerated equipment deliveries, many Guard units around the nation still remain drastically under equipped and hope that these urgent needs will be addressed as soon as possible.

To supplement our troops overseas, my state sent nearly \$500,000 in radios, computers and safety equipment. This equipment is also still overseas, handed from one North Carolina unit to another as they rotate in and out of service in Iraq.

It is an old saying among those in the Guard that they are first in line to get called on and last in line to get equipped. With the proper equipment, the Guard can keep themselves from harm's way when they are abroad and they can keep their communities safer when they are involved in homeland security and defense missions.

North Carolina and other states will always do what they can to support their troops, but it is a responsibility of the Congress, the federal government, to find the resources necessary to give these troops the vehicles, communications equipment, arms and other supplies they need to carry out their vital missions abroad and at home.

This also includes making sure that the families of our active-duty and reserve soldiers have the support that they need. I know that the Commission is mindful of the stresses that extended deployments and heightened operations have placed on National Guard members and on their families.

There is bipartisan support among governors for permanent legislation to provide members and their families' seamless health coverage through full participation in TRICARE Reserve Select (TRS) on a cost-share basis regardless of deployment history. For the many Guard members who live in rural areas where no healthcare providers participate in TRICARE, I encourage the Commission to recommend legislation which will ensure a consistent, accessible healthcare benefit.

To date, our employers, in North Carolina and across the country, have been supportive of their employees that serve their country in the National Guard. In North Carolina, we pay our state employees the difference between their regular salary and their Guard salary if they are called into active federal duty. This is not unique. Many businesses do this too.

For this support to continue, the Commission may wish to consider proposing incentives to employers that are supportive of their employees that serve in the Guard. We should recognize those that go above and beyond the existing law which provides employment protection to our soldiers.

Finally, there are two suggestions I would like to make as you contemplate the future of the Guard and Reserves.

First, keep involving governors in the dialogue. Had the President done so before making his budget recommendation, my colleagues and I would not have had to send the letter I mentioned earlier.

Second, it is important that the National Guard and Reserve have a stronger voice and a more formal relationship with the office of the Secretary of Defense. I hope that you will give consideration to ways to accomplish this goal.

Let me close by saying that the National Guard plays a vital role in national defense, homeland security and emergency preparedness. The work of this Commission is critical in ensuring that they continue to be successful. We must take the time now to rebuild and strengthen these vital units before we are faced with another tragedy like that of September 11, 2001.

Thank you again for the opportunity to talk with you today.

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