

Remarks Following a Tour of Tornado Damage in Vilonia, Arkansas

May 7, 2014

Well, good afternoon, everybody. Obviously, we just had a chance to tour some of the areas that were devastated by last week's tornadoes and had a chance to meet with some of the families who lost loved ones. I also had a chance to thank some of the first responders and the recovery workers and members of the National Guard who have been working nonstop to help families and businesses pick up the pieces after this devastating tornado.

I want to express my deep appreciation for Governor Beebe and his outstanding leadership; Senator Pryor, Congressman Griffin, Mayor Firestone. They all showed great leadership and were here, hands-on, on the ground throughout these difficult days. And I'm here to make sure that they know and that everybody who's been affected knows that the Federal Government is going to be right here until we get these communities rebuilt. Because when something like this happens to a wonderful community like this one, it happens to all of us, and we've got to be there for them.

After the tornadoes touched down, I immediately approved a major disaster declaration to make sure every Federal resource was available to help folks in Faulkner County and other areas affected by the tornadoes. At my direction, FEMA deployed Incident Management Assistance Teams to support local recovery efforts. Craig Fugate was down here the day after the storm, and a team of the Army Corps of Engineers has been helping search through the debris.

Here in Vilonia, the recovery process is just beginning. It's especially difficult because this town has seen more than its fair share of tragedy. Almost exactly 3 years ago, another tornado leveled parts of Vilonia, and some families and businesses had just finished rebuilding when they were forced to start all over. But folks here are tough. They look out for one another, and that's been especially clear over the past week.

Immediately after the tornado hit, about 200 people, including fire crews from other counties, were ready to go house to house searching for injured neighbors. Some survivors were driven to the hospital by complete strangers, and in the days that followed, thousands of volunteers showed up to help remove debris and hunt for belongings, pick up trash, and deliver supplies and water. And one volunteer, 16-year-old Casey Williams, did such a good job coordinating relief efforts that Arkansas State troopers started taking orders from her. I had a chance to meet her, and she is extraordinarily impressive. So I don't know what she's going to be doing in the future, but I know it's going to be something great.

More than any disaster, it is that dedication and that commitment to each other that truly defines this town. As one resident said, "We just say a prayer and then get to work." So the people of Vilonia and all the other towns devastated by the storm understand there's a lot of work that remains to be done. But I'm here to remind them that they're not doing this work alone. Your country is going to be here for you. We're going to support you every step of the way. You are in our thoughts and prayers, Mr. Mayor. Thank you for the great leadership that you've shown. I know that you can count on your Governor and your Senator and your Congressman here to make sure that every resource that we have available to you is going to be there.

And one of the things that the mayor expressed to me that we've got some concerns about is when this happens in a town like this, it's not just the infrastructure and the buildings that are torn down. You also lose part of your sales tax base. And so we're going to have to figure out how they can make sure that they get back on their feet. And I'll be sure to work with Congressman Griffin, Senator Pryor, and Governor Beebe to see if we can do something on that front as well. But I could not be more impressed by the spirit of community that's here.

We've got this gentleman right here I just had a chance to meet, who was in one of these homes where he lives just when the storm hit. Thankfully, he and his 16-year-old son and wife are okay. It's a reminder, obviously, that as important as possessions are, nothing is more important than family. Those families that I had a chance to meet—meet with, they're still mourning those they lost. But they couldn't be more grateful and thankful for the way the community has responded. So this is a testament to the strength of this community, the strength of Arkansas, and the strength of America. And I could not be more proud of everybody who has participated in the recovery process. All right?

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:30 p.m.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Vilonia, AR, tornado damage, tour.

Locations: Vilonia, AR.

Names: Beebe, Michael D.; Firestone, James; Fugate, W. Craig; Griffin, Tim; Pryor, Mark L.; Williams, Casey.

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