

U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
Washington, DC 20528



# Homeland Security

November 19, 2007

The Honorable Bennie Thompson  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security  
2432 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

11-26-2007 001394

Dear Chairman Thompson:

Thank you for your November 2 inquiry into the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) press conference held on October 23, 2007. I share your view that the episode was inexcusable and should never happen again.

Upon learning of this event, my Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, Russ Knocke, was assigned to FEMA to temporarily serve as the Acting Director of External Affairs. He was charged with reviewing what happened at the October 23 press conference, identifying appropriate reforms within the Office of External Affairs, and leading the office during a period of transition.

Mr. Knocke has completed his review of the events that led up to and followed the press conference. He found no indication of malicious or preconceived intent to deceive the media or the public with the planning and execution of the press conference. He also confirmed that the information conveyed during the press conference was accurate. Mr. Knocke concluded that a lack of management and oversight within the FEMA External Affairs Office combined with a series of poor decisions and overarching desire to disseminate information quickly about the southern California wildfires contributed to this highly regrettable episode.

At your request, Mr. Knocke also researched whether anything similar to this has ever occurred at other component agencies. He found one other instance where a staff member asked a question during a press event of an agency official. In January 2006, a career public affairs officer (PAO) asked a question of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Assistant Secretary during a press conference in San Antonio, Texas. The PAO, well known amongst San Antonio media, was standing with nearly a dozen reporters, but did not identify herself as staff when posing the question. The PAO expressed to a supervisor, after the press conference had begun, a desire to ask a question of the Assistant Secretary. The PAO was advised by the supervisor against doing so, but asked a question anyway. The Assistant Secretary briefly answered the PAO's question

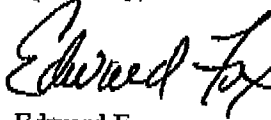
and then continued to take several more questions from media. The PAO was verbally reprimanded by her immediate supervisor and a headquarters public affairs manager.

Mr. Knocke found that the intent of staff involved in each instance was different, but both episodes were foolish and completely unacceptable. Nothing can be more important than credibility and integrity when communicating with the public. These are core tenets of Department-wide communications operations, which we constantly reinforce among staff.

Some reforms are already being implemented within FEMA External Affairs including the establishment of FEMA Press Event Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). Among the procedures put in place by the SOP, employees are prohibited from asking any questions during a press conference. Mr. Knocke will continue to work with the FEMA External Affairs Office and is coordinating with outside organizations on training and professional development for public affairs staff on ethics in journalism and other related topics. He is also working with outside associations on options for creating a more robust, disciplined and sustainable training and professional development program for Department of Homeland Security Public Affairs Officers nationwide.

Thank you again for your interest in the Department's communications operations, and for your appreciation of the importance of credibility and transparency in media relations.

Respectfully,



J. Edward Fox  
Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs  
Department of Homeland Security