

WASHINGTON, DC – Today, Congressman Mike Honda (D-CA) issued the following statement on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee’s “Restoring Emergency Services to Protect Our Nation From Disasters (RESPOND) Act:

“Today, the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee will take the first step in correcting a grave error Congress made in 2002, when it passed legislation stripping the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) of its independent status, folding it into a newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS). I am particularly proud that this legislation – which elevates FEMA to independent Cabinet-level status – will include a provision I authored to improve disaster preparedness and response services for limited English proficiency (LEP) communities, complementing stand-alone legislation I will soon introduce barring discrimination on the basis of English proficiency in disaster relief law.

“Following Hurricane Katrina, many ethnic communities did not receive critical information directing them to shelters, evacuation points, and aid stations. As a result, thousands of individuals suffered hardship unnecessarily, and rescuers were forced to contend with a higher number of stranded individuals than may have otherwise been the case had federal agencies worked more effectively with state and local officials to reach out to ethnic and LEP communities.

“To ensure that LEP communities are fully integrated into the nation’s disaster preparedness planning I will also soon introduce legislation amending the Non-Discrimination in Disaster Assistance Section of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, in order to specifically prohibit discrimination on the basis of English proficiency.

“Today, in addition to addressing specific LEP disparities, the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee will take the first overall step to restore FEMA’s independence by marking up H.R. 5316, the RESPOND Act. This legislation elevates FEMA to a cabinet-level agency and sets new qualifications for its director.

“The bill makes clear FEMA’s responsibility for leading and coordinating federal efforts to prepare for, respond to, recover from, and mitigate against the effects of all hazards, including major disasters and emergencies. By requiring the FEMA director to maintain certain essential capabilities, this legislation will ensure that, in the next disaster, FEMA responds as the American people deserve.

“In 2002, Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Ranking Member Jim Oberstar offered an amendment, which 163 of my colleagues and I supported, that would have preserved FEMA’s independent status and ensured that the agency focus just as much on natural disasters as it does on homeland security. Tragically, a majority of the Congress voted against

its approval and the agency was made part of DHS.

“Today, we take the first step to right this colossal wrong. I am proud that I was able to work with Chairman Young and Ranking Member Oberstar to include in the Manager’s Amendment to H.R. 5316 provisions from my soon-to-be-introduced bill. The Manager’s Amendment will

\* Explicitly prohibit discrimination on the basis of English proficiency.

\* Require FEMA to identify, in coordination with state and local governments, population segments with limited English proficiency across the country and integrate these population segments into account during disaster preparedness planning.

\* Ensure that all FEMA notices are translated into languages spoken in disaster areas, and will provide a clearinghouse of model language assistance programs to guide states in their outreach efforts to LEP communities.

“I thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for working with me on this important issue, and I applaud the Committee’s efforts to, once again, make FEMA the independent agency it should be.”