In the first overhaul of the nation's emergency response system since Hurricane Katrina, government officials announced Tuesday that the Federal Emergency Management Agency would once again take the lead role in disaster response and that it would use an amendable, computer-driven doctrine to coordinate federal, state and local resources.

The doctrine is embodied in the National Response Framework, a 90-page electronic document that can be changed by local officials if they find kinks in its guidelines after responding to an emergency. The framework, announced by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, replaces the rigid, 427-page National Response Plan, which was focused on responding to terrorist attacks when Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the Gulf Coast in 2005.

"Unlike past plans, the National Response Framework is always active, emphasizing and implementing lessons learned every single day," Mr. Chertoff said at a news conference in Washington. "This is a living document."

Elected officials who lobbied for changes in the government's disaster guidelines said that equally significant was who would take the lead in carrying out the new framework. At Mr. Chertoff's side at the news conference was R. David Paulison, the FEMA administrator, who will now serve as a primary adviser to President Bush on disaster response.

FEMA's advisory role was diminished after the agency was placed under the umbrella of the Homeland Security Department in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks. After Hurricane Katrina nearly four years later, critics said the overlap had contributed to the government's paralysis in responding to the storm.

The framework still gives management responsibilities to officials of the Homeland Security Department if there is a disaster. But urgent decisions on where to shift federal resources will be FEMA's call.
In addition, a rule that required Homeland Security to identify a disaster as an incident of national significance before any sweeping federal response has now been discarded. That declaration took days after Hurricane Katrina.

Homeland Security Evaluates FEMA’s Preparedness


**Homeland Security evaluates FEMA’s preparedness**

The Department of Homeland Security's Inspector General Richard Skinner said in April that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has made "solid" progress in getting ready for the next disaster; however, it is still not prepared for a catastrophe of the magnitude of Hurricane Katrina.

While reporting before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, Skinner reported that FEMA had improved in areas such as tracking supplies, staging an evacuation of the Gulf Coast, and ensuring that properly working communications equipment would be in place in a disaster. He cited "modest" gains in areas such as overseeing federal contracts, developing a disaster housing plan, and assembling a highly trained workforce.

The lowest grade FEMA received was for overseeing "mission assignments" made to other agencies. There is a need to prevent "misunderstandings" and to be able to track whether the agency can ensure that the work is properly done, according to the report.

FEMA Administrator David Paulson told the committee panel that FEMA is more "responsive" than in the past and that he looked at this report as a "validation of FEMA'S efforts." "FEMA gets mixed grades,"

Bill Walsh, Washington Bureau, *The Times-Picayune*,
Gustav reveals progress, continuing vulnerabilities

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Hurricane Gustav proved Monday that at least there are some lessons people don't have to learn twice.

Three years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, drowned New Orleans, displaced hundreds of thousands of residents and killed 1,800, the complacency and government ineptitude revealed by that storm have been replaced by better planning, more competence, less cronyism and a healthier respect for the awesome power of nature.

As Gustav moved inland, it looked as if New Orleans had weathered the worst without a repeat of the August 2005 catastrophe. But the storm caused extensive damage elsewhere along the Gulf Coast and still could trigger major flooding in western Louisiana and eastern Texas.

There was a reticence to let out a sigh of relief too soon this time, as well as other major shifts in attitude. This time, there was no flyover of the devastated area by an aloof President Bush looking out the window of Air Force One. This time, Bush canceled his appearance at the Republican National Convention in St. Paul and visited storm shelters in Texas. In fact, Republicans wisely scaled back their carefully choreographed gathering. GOP nominee John McCain recognized that sometimes the best politics is no politics. He flew to Jackson, Miss., for a storm briefing and said it was important to reach out to help "fellow citizens in this time of tragedy and disaster."

If anybody deserves that compassion and aid, it is the twice-battered people of the Gulf Coast, who are still healing from the wounds of Katrina and, in many ways, just starting to rebuild. At least they and the nation can take some solace in what went right this time:

*Evacuation. As Gustav approached, nearly 2 million fled the coast, urged on by state and local leaders, including New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin (whose hyperbolic "storm of the century" warning got people's attention but might hurt his credibility the next time around). Before Katrina, not only had the evacuation order come too late, but there was no real way to make it stick in a city where many residents were too poor, too old, too sick or too unworried to leave. This time, residents were bused from neighborhood pickup points to the train station, where buses and trains took them out of harm's way.
*Readiness. Three years ago, the Federal Emergency Management Agency proved utterly inept. Little wonder: Its director had worked as a commissioner at an Arabian horse society before his presidential appointment. Today, FEMA's director is a former fire chief with years of experience; his deputy is a retired Coast Guard vice admiral. The agency has been revamped, and that showed in detailed planning. Patients were moved from hospitals. Food, water and rescue teams were ready. Evacuees were allowed to take their pets to avoid the tragedies that occurred when owners stayed behind during Katrina, refusing to abandon beloved cats and dogs.

*Protections. Congress and the Bush administration have poured billions of dollars into repairing and upgrading the failed levees. And certainly those levees are stronger. But the topping of the Industrial Canal floodwall was an ominous reminder of the tiny margin for error. In at least one other nearby parish, water was pouring over a levee and lives were at risk.

For all the lessons learned and improvements made, there is much unfinished business. Miles of planned levee upgrades are incomplete. Many residents have been lured by a false sense of safety to rebuild in neighborhoods still at risk. The federal government hasn't begun rebuilding the marshes, swamps and barrier islands so crucial to slowing down storms and protecting the coast. And the federal flood insurance program still promotes risky development in coastal areas.

The nation can be proud of its progress since the international disgrace that was Katrina. But with Hanna and possibly Ike poised to strike the U.S. mainland next, there's no time or place for celebration.