Thank you, Senator Hutchison. Chairman Cochran, members, thank you for the opportunity to address this committee.

Like Senator Hutchison and all of you, I learned at an early age that your word is your bond. Today I am asking the federal government to live up to its word.

Federal officials made a solemn commitment to reimburse our costs for providing housing, food and medicine to hundreds of thousands of victims of Katrina. Less than four weeks later, when our state became the victim of a second devastating hurricane, more promises were made.

But to date, promised federal financial assistance has been woefully inadequate.

First, we were promised that the federal government would develop and implement a national housing program for Katrina victims, and after Rita, we were verbally assured by top HUD officials that Texas would receive hundreds of millions of dollars for housing and infrastructure needs.

What has been delivered so far? Financial aid that is a fraction of what was promised, and less than one percent of all funds allocated by HUD through Community Development Block Grants. Katrina victims left in hotels received ever-changing eviction deadlines. And to date there remains no viable or clear plan to return victims to their home state.

Second, to offset unexpected education costs we were promised by Congress a per-child reimbursement of up to $7,500 for evacuee students, including the 38,000 enrolled in our schools as of last month. Instead, we are being shortchanged between $2,000 and $3,500 per student.

Third, we were promised that Katrina and Rita victims would be treated equally by the federal government. Instead, Texans impacted by Rita are receiving less federal assistance than the victims of Katrina.

Try explaining this discrepancy to people in towns like Orange, Beaumont and Port Arthur. They were the first in line to welcome waves of evacuees coming into Texas. They triaged thousands, provided food and a safe haven to those with nothing but the clothes on their backs, even opened their homes and businesses to them at their own expense. And then after tragedy struck them in the midst of helping all these people – and their homes were destroyed, their
jobs lost, their lives turned upside down – Washington responded by providing them less than those whose lives they helped save.

Rita seems to be the storm that no one in Washington wants to remember. But let me be clear: it’s a storm that continues to take a great toll.

75,000 homes were destroyed or damaged, about half of which were uninsured, and electric utility infrastructure across the region was crippled.

I’m sure none of us here would like to do what local leaders in Southeast Texas have had to do, which is explain to Texas victims of Rita why they have a separate food stamp line that provides less food for their families than the victims of Katrina. Or for that matter, why the federal government will pay for only 75 percent of their debris removal costs, but 100 percent for victims of the very same storm living a few miles away in Louisiana.

These discrepancies cannot be explained, because they do not make sense. Mother Nature treated Rita victims on both sides of the border with equal wrath, and the federal government should treat Rita victims in both states with equal compassion and equal assistance.

This is not just a matter of fairness; it is a matter of true need. Texas victims of Rita are not just bearing the great financial burden that resulted from the second storm, but also the expenses they so willingly incurred to help victims of the first storm.

When Governor Blanco called me on August 31st, I didn't ask her how long her citizens would be displaced, or what the plan was to get them back home. I simply said, “Send them here.”

What ensued was the most massive domestic relief effort ever undertaken on U.S. soil. And even if Washington hadn't promised us one cent, we would have done what we did because you can't put a price on lives saved.

But the fact is, in the midst of great tragedy, Washington did make a lot of promises. And if Washington gives short shrift to a Good Samaritan state like Texas, it will send chills down the spine of any governor asked to be a good neighbor in the future.

We still have 640,000 hurricane victims in our state. Our hospitals, schools and social services are under great strain. I know you have a tremendous obligation in rebuilding Louisiana and Mississippi. But don't forget the state that continues to host so many of their citizens, the state that suffered its own catastrophic hurricane, the State of Texas.

Just yesterday, federal Coordinator of Gulf Coast Rebuilding Don Powell informed his Texas counterpart, Michael Williams, that we should not expect any additional help from Washington because the damage we sustained was caused mostly by wind, and not water.

Perhaps helping only flood victims makes sense to some, but I ask you to view the situation from the perspective of the people whose lives were forever changed by these disasters. It doesn't matter to them which force of nature leveled their home or school or business, all that matters is whether their government is going to supply the promised aid they need to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives.

The $2 billion I ask you to appropriate for Texas is conservative, critically needed and carefully documented in the Texas Rebounds report I have provided to this committee.

It includes $322 million to rebuild homes badly damaged by Rita, $338 million so Texas can continue to educate tens
of thousands of dislocated children, and nearly $500 million to restore utilities, rebuild critical government infrastructure and repair vital first responder equipment.

This report also provides specific details justifying additional federal funding for public safety efforts, small business and workforce assistance, medical care for the sick and elderly, transportation and other priorities.

These funds are absolutely essential to ensure not only that Texas fully recovers from the 2005 hurricane season, but that the American people can place their faith in the credibility of a federal government that keeps its word.

Our needs remain great. And the rest of the nation is watching carefully to see how Washington repays those who go to great lengths to help the victims of a national tragedy. Thank you.