Thank you Judge Griffith. Texas is indebted to you for your leadership in dealing with not one but two catastrophic hurricanes, the second of which made landfall just down the road in Sabine Pass.

That entire period of time – from late August until late September – was one of the most difficult periods of time this state has ever endured. And yet it was also our finest hour.

And the reason is because of the leadership, the courage and the compassion of the men and women in this room.

Emergency response personnel, local elected officials and concerned, everyday citizens made me so proud to be governor of the greatest state in the union.

If you go back to that late August day, some of the first rescue workers on the ground in New Orleans when Katrina struck were the search and rescue personnel of Texas Task Force One.

Texas first responders performed more than 11,000 life-saving rescues in Louisiana.

They were capable of such an astonishing number of rescues because they prepared for it time and time again in training exercises.

And then, as people fled Louisiana, thousands pored across our border and found refuge right here in Southeast Texas.

You opened your homes, your businesses and your houses of worship to give them a place to rest and a warm meal.

You triaged thousands, getting to a hospital those with the greatest need.

And you provided a stable environment for our nation’s most fragile citizens: the sick, the elderly and young children.
And before coastal Texans could even catch their breath, you learned about a category five hurricane brewing in the gulf, heading anywhere from Corpus Christi to the Louisiana line.

And you did it all over again, stretching your capacity to move millions of people out of Rita's way.

And that Friday night, all we could do was watch and wait, hoping and praying that lives would be spared and property protected.

The damage, of course, was devastating, totaling billions of dollars.

And yet, based on some people’s perspective, it’s as if Rita never hit our shores.

Rita is the hurricane that no one in Washington wants to remember.

And yet its great toll continues to be felt.

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

Despite that, the federal bureaucracy treated Southeast Texans as lesser citizens.

How else can you explain victims of Rita being placed in 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?

I’m especially mindful of this discriminatory treatment because of where we are today, the Ford Center.

It was right here that you provided refuge for thousands who came here with little more than the clothes on their back.

And then, when Rita made its way toward our coast, you not only evacuated local residents 12 hours before tropical force winds reached land, you also evacuated the many evacuees that had put such a tremendous strain on local and state resources.

And yet you didn’t even receive equal consideration from the federal government despite your Herculean effort.

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.

You are here this week to talk about lessons learned.
One of the first lessons we learned is we can’t wait on Washington to act to ensure the safety and security of our citizens.

We didn’t learn that from Rita, because we took decisive action…but from Katrina.

At the same time, Rita exposed flaws in our own planning that we are working to rectify with the next hurricane season just one week away and a recent prediction that Texas would be the target of a catastrophic storm early in the season.

That’s why last fall I formed The Task Force on Evacuation, Transportation and Logistics, chaired by Jack Little, which took detailed testimony from local officials and emergency response personnel.

Their report from February gives us a roadmap to make coastal evacuations safer and more efficient based on detailed advanced planning, and changes to our command and control structure.

With interlocking state, regional and local plans, coordination will occur at the state level while execution remains on the regional and local levels where it belongs.

In a couple of critical aspects, the report requires more detailed planning.

It requests that the Department of Transportation and the Department of Public Safety develop a detailed contra-flow plan for key interstates and highways and that execution of that plan occur before an evacuation begins.

It also recommends planning for fuel and aid stations at regular intervals along an evacuation route, which is important to the convenience and safety of Texans evacuating in gridlock.

Let me say something about evacuation gridlock: There is no magic formula to end all traffic gridlock during an evacuation.

The fact is there is no magic formula to end gridlock in Houston on an average workday, let alone when a couple million people or more head for the highways within a few hours of each other.

Our aim is to make the situation better with spaced out fuel stations and aid stations.

The second aspect where planning is critical is in safely evacuating our special needs populations.

Wisely, the evacuation task force’s report recommends that all licensed and unlicensed special needs facilities maintain up-to-date evacuation plans, which is not the case for unlicensed facilities today.

It also would establish a statewide database for Texans with special needs while keeping the responsibility for information gathering in local hands.

As you know, keeping track of, and mobilizing to safety, our special needs population is an immense task that
requires detailed coordination for a population that not only includes those in nursing homes and hospitals but the indigent without transportation, and those without homes.

We also learned that we under-estimated how much evacuation behavior is dictated by the availability of shelter for pets.

Of course, in Texas, where your dog is as prized a possession as your pick-up truck it should come as no surprise that many Texans chose to ride out the storm rather than separate from their pets.

This is another important aspect of our special needs plan.

We recently tested our response capabilities with the largest hurricane exercise in Texas history.

We tested the entire coastline of Texas, and included communities like El Paso, Lubbock and Waco, all of which were instrumental to our response to Katrina and Rita.

Of course, there is no test like the real thing, and unfortunately, the real thing is not a matter of “if” but “when.”

The reason I asked for one person to serve as a regional unified commander was not to create division among different elected officials but because I do not believe life and death decisions which should be made in a matter of minutes are best made by committees.

Hurricanes cross jurisdictional boundaries.

That's why it is important for the state to have a greater coordinating role, and for local implementation to occur under a regional command structure as the report recommends.

No hurricane response plan can anticipate every eventuality because reality always throws curve balls that even the best simulation models will miss from time to time.

But I do believe, because of your work and expertise, we are better prepared today to effectively respond to a hurricane than we were one year ago today.

The fact is, we have to be, and Texans will expect nothing less.

Thank you, and may God bless us and protect us.