

Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano

One of the great things about the cabinet is that President Obama has assembled a group, many of us have worked in other roles together before, but all of us share a common commitment to ideas like environmental justice, like climate change adaptation, among the many things we do.

Now you're probably thinking in this audience, what is the Secretary of Homeland Security doing at this conference? What could she possibly have to do with, when it doesn't really involve airports, and it doesn't ... [audience comment]

I'm getting around to that. Work with me here. I'm trying to do my segue. [laughter]

But, seriously, we are here – and you're going to have my senior counselor, Alice Hill, on the panel after this – we are here, because we know we have incredible responsibilities to address the potential impacts of climate change and environmental adaptation for populations that are most at risk, and they need to be front and center in our short- and long-term planning. They need to be considered in our policies, and they need to be part of how we carry out our responsibilities during and after any incident.

So as we look at climate change, the climate change that we are in, and think about the environmental phenomenon that is happening in the course of our own lives, we translate that into increased drought. We translate that into increased likelihood of wildfires, particularly catastrophic fires in the West, we translate that into more category four and five hurricanes, and that affects communities around the gulf but also up and down the Atlantic seaboard and the Pacific as well, and other natural occurrences that are affected by changes in climate.

Changes in climate really translate into huge environmental changes that have impacts on communities and also on national security, because they raise not only the issues of making sure that we are taking into account and caring for the most at-risk populations, but that we are also looking at and planning for the potentiality of mass migrations, demographic changes, patterns, concentrations of economic assets, population growth in different areas, deteriorating infrastructure. All of this gets knit together under this umbrella of climate change and environmental adaptation.

So when you take that as the topic of this conference and ask, well, what is Homeland Security doing here? We are here because all of those things fall directly in our lane. So early on, we recognized this at DHS. You know, we were sitting back, thinking about not just the issues that we are dealing with today and they are broad and diverse. We're probably the broadest and most diverse department of all of the federal family; we're comprised, or knit together, of 22 different agencies when we were first formed. We're the third largest federal department now. We have over a quarter of a million people who are full-time employees and another couple hundred thousand who are contractors. It is big. So when we came in as the third secretary of Homeland Security, the first under a Democratic Administration, one of the things we looked at was, OK, what are some of the long-term things we need to talk about and prepared things for.

So we formed the cleverly entitled climate Change Adaptation Task Force, but it was really charged with identifying and assessing the impact that climate change could have on the missions and operations of the Department of Homeland Security, so I asked some questions that we need to answer. For example: How will FEMA work with state and local partners to plan for increased flooding or wildfire or hurricane activity that is more serious than we have seen heretofore? What assistance can the Coast Guard bring to bear to assist, to assist remote villages, for example, in Alaska, which have already been negatively impacted by changes up in the Arctic? How will we deal with the possibility of mass migration or the possibility of epidemiological changes related to environmental adaptation or climate change?

So the task force delivered its initial report to me last week. It includes an analysis of the key risks, it also includes recommendations of how we are going to address these matters. How do we ensure that we continue to focus on how climate change affects our most vulnerable citizens during, after and after an incident? How can we better assist urban residents if we see an increase in floods and hurricanes and other climate-related disasters? How can we focus on how climate change is going to affect our rural citizenry, including those who live along our borders, both northern and southern? So it's that kind of work that we have already undertaken in a very serious way at DHS and working with other members of the Cabinet. We have as our kind of overall mission, as it were, to make sure that our country is always prepared to be prosperous, strong, prepared and resilient, and we kind of think about it that that way. To sustain that, to get there and to sustain that, means that the topics being addressed here today, the ongoing discussions being held within the Department of Homeland Security, the ongoing work being done by departments like Interior, like EPA, like Agriculture, that is what is going to be necessary in order to say very confidently to the American people, we are prepared, we are strong, we are resilient, even in the face of all the challenges that climate change presents.

So what you are doing here today will help us further the work we have already begun. Speaking on behalf of the President and on behalf of all the men and women at the Department, I want to say thank you for your participation. Thank you very much.