

Reuters News | Obama taps experienced emergency boss as FEMA chief

By Jeff Mason, Reuters News

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Reuters) - U.S. President Barack Obama picked a seasoned emergency response coordinator from Florida on Wednesday to lead the federal agency that was widely panned for its handling of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

... EXPERIENCED OPERATOR

Fugate has years of experience in emergency work.

Jeb Bush, the former president's brother and former Florida governor, appointed Fugate to his current role in October 2001. He coordinated some 23 declared state emergencies including four major hurricanes in 2004 and four in 2005.

FEMA became a household name in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. It falls under the Department of Homeland Security, which was created after the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States in 2001.

Janet Napolitano, who heads the department, welcomed the announcement.

"Craig Fugate is no stranger to emergency management or to FEMA," she said. "He is one of the most respected emergency managers in the nation, and the work he's accomplished in Florida serves as a model for other states to follow."

Napolitano and Fugate will appear together in New Orleans, which is still recovering from the hurricane, on Thursday.

Obama's choice of Fugate drew praise from both sides of the political aisle in Washington.

"Director Fugate is keenly in tune with Florida's needs on hurricane preparedness and response," Representative Gus Bilirakis, a Republican from Florida, said.

Fugate rose from a volunteer firefighter and paramedic to a 10-year stint as the emergency manager for Florida's Alachua County. He is known for instructing Floridians to be prepared to help themselves in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.

The state was hit by storms Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne in 2004. Together they caused more than \$45 billion in damage.

The next year, Hurricane Katrina hit Florida before moving on to Louisiana, where it became the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history. A few weeks later, Hurricane Wilma ravaged southern Florida, causing \$20 billion in damage, the third highest U.S. toll in history.