
Interview: Rep. Earle Banks

What Katrina Has Done To Mississippi's Economy

Mississippi State Representative Earle Banks, a Democrat, has represented House District 67 in Hinds County since 1993. He is an attorney, a funeral director, and insurance executive as well. Representative Banks serves with the Jackson State University Foundation, and 100 Black Men. He was interviewed by Mary Jane Freeman on Sept. 21, shortly after he had toured some of the state's counties which were devastated by Hurricane Katrina.



EIR: Can you give us an idea of the magnitude of devastation that Katrina has wrought upon your state of Mississippi, and what the legislature is doing?

Banks: We had a meeting at which all committee chairs were reporting to the Speaker and to each other, on what they had found to be the extent of damage in various areas. The damage, from reports that we've had from across the area and across the state, includes these estimates: about \$1.4 billion damage to highways and bridges; \$1.2 billion to the timber industry; over \$1 billion to the K-12 school system, damage to the buildings, buses, books and equipment; \$1 billion to higher education buildings and other state property; at least a half a billion to the poultry industry; and this is not even considering the private businesses, or local- and county-owned buildings, and so forth. . . .

EIR: I've been looking at the damage to the ports. As far as I can tell, the ports of Pascagoula and Gulfport were the worst-hit.

Banks: Right. The damage to those ports is in the neighborhood of at least \$40 million. I think it was around \$17 million damage to the Port of Pascagoula, and at least \$25 million to Gulfport. Also, the damage to the marine industry, the aquamarine industry, the aquaculture, destroyed all the oyster beds and the shrimping industry; they have no estimates out, but they are going to be devastated. The Mississippi Sound produces about 40% of the country's oyster harvest and 10%

of the shrimp industry. We have some barrier islands about 12-15 miles out into the Gulf, and the area between there is called the Mississippi Sound. They have been decimated.

EIR: The other thing I've looked at is the wipe-out of the rail lines in the state. Also the road infrastructure.

Banks: Oh, yes, but I don't even know the extent of the damage to rail as yet. The only thing I do know, is that they do plan to rebuild. Also the casinos, that were hit bad, do plan to rebuild.

EIR: Is there any perspective on what kind of rebuilding ought to be done at this point?

Banks: Well the Governor has called for a special session next Tuesday, Sept. 27. In that special session, I think the only thing he can have on the table are the casinos, and \$25 million in Small Business Administration development loan grants.

EIR: Did you say \$25 million? That's not much.

Banks: Yes, agreed. But, that is our governor.

EIR: What about the power and utility situation across the state? Has it been restored?

Banks: To my knowledge, all power has been restored to the areas. Individual homes that were flooded, of course, will not be reconnected until those properties can be examined by licensed electricians. But the whole area, in general, has had power restored.

EIR: Do you have any picture of the impact of the oil price hike?

Banks: No, I don't. I do know the refinery in Pascagoula, which was the largest refinery in Chevron's network of refineries, was shut down during the storm.

EIR: What else can you tell us about what is happening in Mississippi after Katrina; and do you have any message for the Federal government as to what they should do?

Banks: Well, they have to revamp FEMA, of course—which everybody from the Gulf Coast to New Orleans realizes. The other problem that I have seen—and this is the part that makes it so horrific—is that FEMA, the Red Cross, Salvation Army, all these agencies, these first responders—and I commend them for what they are doing; I'm not knocking them. But the shortsightedness of what they are doing, is that they are setting up first-response facilities in areas where the most vulnerable people—the ones who could least afford to get out of Gulfport or Biloxi, or New Orleans . . . who did not have the transportation to get out, or the money for the fuel, or whatever—they are setting up these units of first response in areas that may be three and four miles away from where these people reside.

Therefore, what I have seen, is that you have people who are 65-plus years of age who do not have any transportation, and the public transportation system was shutdown; so they are having to walk up to seven miles round-trip to get food, or water. This is ridiculous—and this is in urban areas in downtown Biloxi and Gulfport. These staging areas are so remote. I mean they are in areas where these elderly people, who lived in these neighborhoods all of their lifetime, are not being served.

The other problem that I saw down there, and this is what I saw six days after the storm: In Biloxi for example, six days after the storm, there was no running water, and yet no portable toilets set up anywhere in these neighborhoods. So you have a city of tens of thousands of people with no running water, because all the pumps were shutdown because of the surge of the flooding; and yet FEMA has not come in to set up any port-a-potties anywhere in neighborhoods to collect the human waste. So now you have this cesspool of stuff behind homes—having to bury it, or whatever they have to do with it. It is horrible. It shows how the Bush Administration, Michael Brown—you know, Bush says he takes the blame for it. But it shows how unprepared the Bush Administration was to deal with this type of catastrophe. This is in spite of 9/11, which was over four years ago; it should have said to FEMA and the Bush Administration, “We have got to be prepared for emergencies, whether man-made from terrorism or some other accident, or emergencies of nature.” They are completely unprepared for this.

You go to Shelby, Mississippi—we stopped there—elderly and other people have reported seeing trucks of ice go from one staging area to another staging area. I mean, they’ve got to get the ice to the people. Stop paying thousands and thousands of dollars for ice to be driven across the South.

EIR: Do you have any estimate on how many homes have been destroyed in Mississippi?

Banks: Let me put it this way. Harrison County and Jackson County were hit, but I could not tell you the exact number of houses today; but I could get that to you in a day or two. But on the Gulf Coast, in just those two counties alone, I would say [that] about 70% of the homes and businesses were affected. Probably about 40% of those houses will be found to be destroyed. Whereas you have Hancock County, which is where the eye of Katrina hit; and in that county alone, estimates are coming out as high as 90-95% of all homes and businesses were destroyed.

EIR: It would seem we need a Federal plan the way FDR did, like the old WPA, to put people back to work and rebuild their homes and businesses.

Banks: That is what it is going to take. But as you probably already know, Halliburton is already down there. Yates Construction here in Mississippi, another good old boy tied in

with the Republican administration, is already down there. . . . I mean, all these companies are already hand-picked to be there, getting contracts in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Probably with Halliburton, it is billions of dollars. . . . These are government contracts; not including what private contracts they may get. No bids. It is horrific what they are doing down there. These companies are going to be coming in with their people, and not local people who know the community and may be well qualified. You have, the tax base of the infrastructure down there has been destroyed; that includes the municipalities, the counties and the school boards. They are gone. So we are having to look at what can we do to supplement the tax base. It is going to take *years* for these tax bases to recover from this type of damage.

EIR: So, so far you have not seen that there is hiring of Mississippians going on?

Banks: No. . . . Not Mississippians from within that area. They may come down there and they may have a few Mississippians on their payroll. But I haven’t seen the hiring of Mississippians that were displaced by the storm down there.

Another area of the state that was hit extremely bad, is Jones County, which is where the city of Laurel is located. I also understand, although I have not been to Pike County yet, but it was also hit extremely hard by Hurricane Katrina. Our emphasis in Mississippi seems to be on the Mississippi west coast, but Pike County is about a 50% Black county, same thing in Jones County. But you are not hearing about any kind of relief or efforts for the needs of these two counties. They had 12 deaths alone in Jones County. It was to the east of where Katrina landed and yet it was severely hit. I saw, from being in Jones County—although I could not go through the whole county—that about one-fourth to one-third of homes suffered some type of structural damage. This community was without phone service for almost a week. . . .

EIR: Yes. I think the issue now is what must be the demand made to the U.S. Senate and the Congress, that they do from the top down; or the way LaRouche put it, is you’ve got to have a massive commitment from the Federal government for rebuilding.

Banks: Well, the first thing that we are advocating, of course, is that the local government and individuals down there must have a say-so in how their community is rebuilt. They are the ones that live there. They are the ones that will continue to live there. We cannot come in there to rebuild these communities the way we think they should be; but we have to ask the local people, how do they want their communities rebuilt? It can’t be what Gov. Haley Barbour wants. It has to be what the local mayors, council people, and county commissioners say they want, in terms of how their communities will be rebuilt.