



**State of Louisiana**  
Cemetery Response Task Force  
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Ryan M. Seidemann, J.D., Ph.D., R.P.A.  
Chairman

**Cemetery Response Task Force**  
**Meeting Minutes**  
**December 3, 2021**

**Members Present:**

Lucy McCann – Louisiana Cemetery Board (LCB) Member  
Ryan M. Seidemann – Louisiana Department of Justice (LDOJ) Member  
Gustave Lehmann – Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) Member  
Ginesse Listi – LSU FACES Laboratory (FACES) Member  
Amy Dawson – Governor’s Office of Homeland Security & Emergency Preparedness (GOHSEP), Member

**Others Present:**

Christine Halling – Louisiana Department of Justice (LDOJ) Designee  
Arbie Goings – Goings Consulting Services (GCS)

**Members Absent:**

C. Shane Evans – Louisiana Coroners Association (LCA) Designee

**1. Meeting Start time: 1:00 PM**

Chairman, Ryan Seidemann, called the meeting of the Statewide Cemetery Response Task Force (“CRTF”) to order at 1:00 PM. A quorum of members was present. Pursuant to gubernatorial and legislative authority, this meeting was conducted remotely via Zoom.

**2. Past Minutes:**

The minutes from the May 27, 2021, meeting were reviewed and unanimously approved on a motion of Lucy McCann (LCB) and a second of Amy Dawson (GOHSEP).

**3. Old business:**

Chair Seidemann (DOJ) reported on Laura/Delta/Zeta response data. Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) noted that, since the past (May 2021) meeting, FEMA exhibited a substantial bottleneck in the processing of claims from the 2020 storms. Also during this period, FEMA changed its policies (not a law change, but an interpretation change) regarding what it believed to be coverable under its IA Guidance. This interpretation change—which specifically related to FEMA now rejecting all claims for tombstone-only damage—began to result in substantial numbers of claim packet rejections not seen in the 2016 Floods nor seen or anticipated in the early days of the Laura/Delta response. As of early December, 2021, the number of Laura/Delta impacted graves had increased to 3,288 statewide. This increase in numbers has simply resulted from additional field surveys and response work uncovering previously-unknown damages. The numbers of claims submitted to FEMA for review and processing or administratively resolved as of the date of this meeting is 2,106 (64% of impacted graves from these storms). Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) noted that this number

is not the same as 2,106 paid-out claim packets by FEMA. He noted that FEMA could (and in some cases has) exercised its discretion to reject claims approved by the CRTF for a variety of reasons. Lucy McCann (LCB) asked whether there were a sufficient number of contractors in the area to cover the large number of repairs. Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) responded that there are enough contractors, but that they are getting overloaded which will result in some slow recovery. He also noted that some contractors had stopped accepting claims because they do not want to deal with the FEMA processes. Several graves have also been repaired by contractors without pay or in anticipation of pay from FEMA. Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) noted that this work was done in spite of the CRTF's warnings not to do work until paid by FEMA, but that some of the contractors were doing this work as part of boosting their own goodwill and some are submitting reimbursement claims after the repair work. Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) noted that the CRTF is having to field calls from the public wanting to know what is causing delays once they receive their FEMA payments. He reported that these delays are both supply chain disruptions as well as contractor backlogs, and that such explanations to the public are generally acceptable. Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) reported that the number of caskets and remains recovered stands unchanged from the last meeting at 75 and that there are still an unknown number of unrecovered remains that is likely somewhere between 75 and 150. He noted that it is impossible to know whether these numbers exist because of prior storm impacts resulting in unrecovered caskets and remains or whether, as in the case of the mausoleum structures, poor recordkeeping has resulted in an overestimation of the numbers of individuals entombed in those structures (and thus erroneously increasing the number of expected missing caskets and remains). Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) also reported on conducting several additional casket-search overflights since the May 2021 meeting, but that no additional caskets had been found. He also reported that a contract to conduct a side-scan sonar survey of portions of the Mermentau River have been let to ensure that caskets and vaults are not lying just below the water on the banks, but that the results of that survey have not yet been reported. Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) reported that the trucks of remains from Laura/Delta had to be evacuated due to two tropical events in the summer of 2021. The most recent location was on Department of Wildlife & Fisheries property in Lafayette. They are remaining there during the remainder of the hurricane season and will be moved back to Cameron for decasketing in the early part of 2022. The plan then is to release identified remains and consolidate the unidentified remains into one truck for later forensic identification. Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) noted that it has not yet been decided where the identification work will be done—in Cameron Parish or closer to East Baton Rouge Parish to facilitate easier access by FACES personnel. Ginesse Listi (FACES) noted that her staff could be available over the winter break to assist with decasketing. Dr. Listi (FACES) also offered to check with LSU personnel for possible identification staging areas in the vicinity of East Baton Rouge and Amy Dawson (GOHSEP) offered to check with other contacts for the same purpose. Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) reported that it is anticipated that Laura/Delta claims will be fully submitted by the close of submission deadlines for those storms timely.

On the 2016 Floods: Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) reported that two cemeteries have yet to be completely repaired: Macedonia Freewill in Independence and Bogalusa Cemetery. These are contractor problems. In Independence, there is a single grave that needs to be repaired. In Bogalusa, there are several graves that need to be repaired and that DOJ is now drafting a suit to try to remedy the lack of work in that cemetery.

On 2021 floods: Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) reported that, though a few vaults minimally floated in Orange Grove Cemetery, they did not leave the cemetery or their spaces. No FEMA funding was authorized for this event and the matter did not rise to a level that the CRTF was activated.

### **3. New business:**

Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) reported that the registration deadline for Hurricane Ida closed the week before this meeting. He also reported that there was in excess of 100 FEMA registrants as of the meeting. Although this is a much smaller number than existed at the same time for Laura/Delta, the numbers of impacts were fewer. The number of cemeteries surveyed thus far is 72 and, Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) noted that more survey work is planned. However, the survey work has had to take a back seat to the casket and vault recoveries in Plaquemines and Jefferson Parishes. The total number of graves documented as impacted thus far is 422. Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) reported that 123 sets of human remains and caskets have been recovered thus far. There is no number of anticipated missing caskets at this time. Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) also reported that the Ironton and Lafitte recoveries have taken the majority of the time thus far, encompassing both terrestrial and aquatic recoveries. A side scan sonar survey of Bayou Barataria has also been completed, showing that no subsurface vaults or caskets have been missed in the channel of that waterway. Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) also reported that the survey would continue to Mud Lake. He also reported that multiple Louisiana State Police helicopter flights have been accomplished to search for caskets and vaults in the impact zone. Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) reported that the recovered caskets and vaults are now staged at two different locations: the Jefferson recoveries are staged at the old St. Anthony Church in Barataria and the Ironton recoveries are staged on a rock pad at the cemetery location. Recovery, mapping, surveying, and additional work will be ongoing for some time.

Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) reported that he and Lucy McCann (LCB) had been discussing the need for a post-disaster experience of the CRTF with the legally-mandated identification on casket exteriors. He reported that it would be prudent to undertake a study of the efficacy of these identification methods after the Laura/Delta response is complete. Ms. McCann (LCB) participated in this discussion and noted that such a study would help the industry to understand what works and what does not with regard to these post-Katrina requirements. Amy Dawson (GOHSEP) moved and Dr. Listi (FACES) seconded the motion to produce a report on this topic and the motion passed unanimously.

Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) also raised the issue of possible legislative changes to the CRTF's laws in the 2022 Regular Session. Specifically, he was interested in passing a provision to ensure the exemption of human remains images from the public record. Ms. McCann (LCB) asked if there were any other statutory changes that needed to be made. Dr. Seidemann (DOJ) reported that other possible changes included exemptions for the CRTF from certain provisions of Title 8, exemptions from burial transit permit requirements, a shortening of the CRTF's official name, and the authority to draft regulations. He noted that he would review the CRTF's authority to engage directly with legislators on whether the CRTF could even undertake this work. Ms. Dawson (GOHSEP) also noted that she was checking with her leadership about any ongoing legislative activity by that agency.

**4. Next meeting:**

Unknown at this time. Members will gauge availability and set up the next meeting at a later date.

**5. Adjourn**

Lucy McCann (LCB) moved to adjourn the meeting and Ginesse Listi (FACES) seconded. The vote to adjourn was unanimous and the meeting ended at 1:48 PM.