

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 3188
March 15, 2011

Reviewing America's Disaster Preparedness

The Heritage Foundation

As Americans watch with horror, the death toll from the earthquake and tsunami that hit Japan continues to climb into the thousands. Recent experience has taught the U.S. the crippling effects of disasters—from earthquakes to hurricanes, floods, fires, and oil spills. It is vital that U.S. disaster preparedness undergo constant evaluation and that key changes are made before the country faces another incident, whether natural or man-made.

Ongoing Heritage Foundation research has identified key areas where disaster preparedness should be reviewed and improved. Success must include the private sector, federal agencies, state and local resources, and the military.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the States:

- ***More Than Lip Service: Why Private-Sector Engagement Is Essential***

August 25, 2010

Jena Baker McNeill

<http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/08/More-Than-Lip-Service-Why-Private-Sector-Engagement-Is-Essential>

Perhaps one of the most significant lessons learned from recent U.S. disasters is that the private sector is a critical actor in the homeland security enterprise. Time and again, from the attacks of September 11 to Hurricane Katrina—and even recently with the Deepwater Horizon oil spill—the private sector has been at the forefront of relief and recov-

ery operations. The private sector's indispensable role begs for the federal government to form solid bonds with industry. These relationships not only promote security innovations but allow these new developments to be plugged directly into disaster response efforts.

- ***Forget Earmarks, FEMA Declarations Show Federalization Run Amok***

December 2, 2010

Matt A. Mayer

<http://blog.heritage.org/?p=47532>

From 1787 to 1992, virtually every natural disaster that occurred in America was handled entirely by states and localities and without any federal involvement. Starting in 1993, the U.S. has federalized more natural disasters every presidential Administration. From tornadoes to floods to fires to storms, events that just 20 years ago were ignored by Washington are today treated as if a Category 5 hurricane has hit.

This federalization—like Medicaid, transportation, and earmarks—has created a growing level of dependency by states and localities on FEMA to the point where states have cut their emergency management budgets, knowing that FEMA would

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/wm3188>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

subsidize the state's natural disaster functions. As a result, states aren't prepared for the routine, and FEMA spends too little time preparing for the truly catastrophic.

- ***Federalizing Disasters Weakens FEMA—and Hurts Americans Hit by Catastrophes***
April 13, 2010

Matt A. Mayer and Mark DeBosier

<http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/04/Federalizing-Disasters-Weakens-FEMA-and-Hurts-Americans-Hit-by-Catastrophes>

FEMA has been responding to almost any natural disaster around the country, be it a contained three-county flood or a catastrophe of near-epic proportions like Hurricane Katrina. As a result, many states and localities have trimmed their own emergency-response budgets, often leaving them ill-prepared to handle even rain- or snowstorms without federal assistance. This leaves FEMA stretched far too thin and ill-prepared to respond to grand-scale catastrophes.

The “federalization of disasters” misdirects vital resources, leaving localities, states, and the federal government in a lose–lose situation. FEMA policies should be overhauled to let localities handle smaller, localized disasters and to allow FEMA to respond fully and effectively when it is truly needed. If the status quo continues, it will be a disaster for everyone.

- ***States: Stop Subsidizing FEMA Waste and Manage Your Own Local Disasters***

September 29, 2009

Matt A. Mayer

<http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/09/States-Stop-Subsidizing-FEMA-Waste-and-Manage-Your-Own-Local-Disasters>

All disasters are local. Or so many politicians proclaim. Yet 29 states send their tax money to FEMA only to end up footing the disaster-response bill for the other 21. Unfair? Incredibly so—and inefficient—explains Heritage homeland security expert Matt Mayer. Instead of nationalizing disaster management, states should keep their FEMA taxes and fund and manage their own local disasters. Mayer

explains how to amend the Stafford Act to make this happen.

- ***The Local Role in Disaster Response: Lessons from Katrina and the California Wildfires***
June 4, 2008

Matt A. Mayer, Richard Weitz, Ph.D., and Diem Nguyen

<http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2008/06/The-Local-Role-in-Disaster-Response-Lessons-from-Katrina-and-the-California-Wildfires>

The October 2007 wildfires in California provide a revealing glimpse into the continued federalization of disasters. Trumpeted as proof that Washington is ready for the next Hurricane Katrina, California's response really demonstrates that well-organized state and local efforts are far more critical than federal ones.

Rather than encourage more Washington-centric solutions, Congress and the White House should focus on lessening the federal role in day-to-day state-level emergencies and emphasize a greater responsibility among state and local communities for preparing and developing response plans for local disasters.

- ***Principles for Reform of Catastrophic Natural Disaster Insurance***

April 8, 2009

Matt A. Mayer, David C. John, and James Jay Carafano, Ph.D.

<http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/04/Principles-for-Reform-of-Catastrophic-Natural-Disaster-Insurance>

Along with the winds, rain, and storm surges of Hurricane Katrina came a cacophony of voices urging Congress to adopt a catastrophic hurricane (CAT) fund. A CAT fund, like the bankrupt and highly inefficient National Flood Insurance Program, would provide government insurance to homeowners and businesses to protect against the next catastrophic hurricane. Lost in the chorus of doomsayers is the inconvenient fact that Hurricane Katrina—the most expensive natural disaster in American history—did not bankrupt the insurance industry. Unlike the current Wall Street financial

crisis, the industry did not even require a federal bailout.

Military Readiness:

- ***America Isn't Prepared for Another Big Disaster October 3, 2010***

James Jay Carafano, Ph.D.

<http://www.heritage.org/Research/Commentary/2010/10/America-isnt-prepared-for-another-big-disaster>

On September 15, 2010, the Abbot-Keating Commission—chartered by Congress to assess the Pentagon's capacity to respond in truly catastrophic disasters—reported its conclusions in “Before Disaster Strikes: Imperatives for Enhancing Defense Support of Civil Authorities.” That subtitle pretty much says it all. The armed forces are not ready.

Some of the report's findings are simply stunning. For example, despite nine years of post-9/11 ramping up, “there is currently no comprehensive national integrated planning system to respond to either natural or man-made disasters.”

To make matters worse, federal, state, and local agencies are not even sharing what they are doing now. They are not, the report admonished, “making a sustained and comprehensive effort to share all-hazards response plans.”

- ***Accepting Disaster Relief from Other Nations: Lessons from Katrina and the Gulf Oil Spill***

February 17, 2011

Jena Baker McNeill, James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., Matt A. Mayer, and Richard Weitz, Ph.D.

<http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2011/02/Accepting-Disaster-Relief-from-Other-Nations-Lessons-from-Katrina-and-the-Gulf-Oil-Spill>

The United States is known around the world for sending help—from in-person medical assistance to financial donations—when disasters strike in other countries. When disasters have recently struck the U.S.—9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the Gulf oil spill—other countries have been equally quick to offer help. Yet, as astute as the U.S. is when it comes to delivering aid, the opposite is the case when it comes to responding to foreign offers of aid. It is crucial that the U.S. develop a reliable process by which to accept help from other countries when it is needed. Four national security experts lay out a plan for such a process.

Review and Reform. Tragic events such as Hurricane Katrina and the Gulf oil spill revealed holes in America's disaster preparedness. To prevent future losses of life and property from natural and man-made disasters, the U.S. should localize disaster response and make sure that government entities are integrated with the private sector. Congress should invest intelligently in the military to boost military response capabilities.