

WebMemo



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FEMA Reform and Disaster Response: Heritage Foundation Recommendations

The Heritage Foundation

Hurricane Irene and the East Coast earthquake earlier that week put national attention once again on America's disaster response system, especially the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). And once again, the problems that The Heritage Foundation has been pointing out for years—the federalization of routine disasters, FEMA's funding issues, and the condition of capabilities at all levels of government—were exposed.

The East Coast earthquake lasted a few seconds in Washington, D.C., and did little damage, yet the response to it was chaotic, uncoordinated, and over the top. In this case, the response itself created a disaster—a traffic and commuting disaster. With Hurricane Irene, the relative weakness of the hurricane as it approached land resulted in wind and rain, but nothing that was unpredictable. The weakness evident in Vermont's capabilities and the relative powerlessness of FEMA to help much shows why the current fed-centric model needs to be abandoned.

Below are some recent Heritage writings recommending specific actions that Congress and the White House can take to set things straight and make America more prepared the next time disaster strikes.

Homeland Security 4.0: Overcoming Centralization, Complacency, and Politics

Matt A. Mayer, James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., and
Jessica Zuckerman
August 23, 2011

<http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2011/08/Homeland-Security-4-0-Overcoming-Centralization-Complacency-and-Politics>

States have learned to beg Washington for help whenever a natural disaster strikes in the hope of receiving a FEMA declaration and the accompanying money. Some states have cut their budgets for public assistance believing that they could always obtain FEMA declarations and federal funding. Over the past 10 years, states have slashed their emergency response budgets.

FEMA spends too much time responding to routine natural disasters and not enough time preparing for catastrophic natural disasters, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions, which could have a national impact. This is increasing the likelihood that the federal response to the next catastrophic event will be insufficient.

Congress should reduce the cost-share provision for all FEMA declarations to no more than 25 percent of the costs. This will help to ensure that at least three-fourths of the costs of a disaster are borne by the taxpayers living in the state where the disaster took place. For catastrophes with a nationwide impact—such as 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina—a

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<http://report.heritage.org/wm3359>

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relief provision could provide for a higher federal cost-share if the total costs of the disaster exceed a certain threshold.

Federalizing Disasters Weakens FEMA— and Hurts Americans Hit by Catastrophes

Matt A. Mayer and Mark DeBosier

April 13, 2010

<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 rainstorms 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 must 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.

The Solution to FEMA’s Budget Woes Is Not More Money

Jena Baker McNeill and Matt A. Mayer

April 21, 2010

<http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/04/The-Solution-to-FEMAs-Budget-Woes-Is-Not-More-Money>

FEMA Administrator W. Craig Fugate recently sent a letter to Congress indicating serious budget shortfalls that could jeopardize FEMA’s ability to respond to disasters. It is expected that this letter will be followed by a request for \$5.1 billion in emergency supplemental funding from Congress.

Addressing budget shortfalls by pumping additional dollars into the agency will only waste more taxpayer money without actually solving the fiscal

problems plaguing FEMA. For too long, FEMA has federalized disaster response to the point where every routine disaster receives an onslaught of federal funds. FEMA should look to radically redefine what it does and what it does not, thereby putting states and locals back in the driver’s seat of disaster response.

Cantor Demands Common-Sense Spending Cuts in Exchange for More FEMA Aid

Matt A. Mayer

August 28, 2011

<http://blog.heritage.org/2011/08/28/cantor-demands-common-sense-spending-cuts-in-exchange-for-more-fema-aid>

Liberals are busy trying to drum up controversy over Representative Eric Cantor’s (R-VA) calls for spending cuts in exchange for more aid to FEMA. Cantor is spot on, though. Hurricane Irene provides Cantor with the ideal case for his positions.

Despite the mass media’s hysterical fear-mongering over Hurricane Irene, the hurricane weakened as it approached land. By the time it hit North Carolina, the eye had largely disintegrated and the strength was downgraded to a Category 1, which was generous. Irene’s swing through New York and New England consisted of a mere tropical storm—lots of rain and wind with some flooding. There ended up being no real reason for FEMA’s involvement with Irene and her remnant rain and wind.

Yet, like Hurricane Dean a couple of years ago—when FEMA spent \$50 million for a cloudy day in Houston—FEMA likely spent tens of millions preparing for Irene and will drop a lot more on declarations issued to states because of Irene. The federalization of fairly routine natural disasters continues unabated.

At least Cantor’s call for spending cuts will force Washington to decide whether it wants to waste finite federal funds on FEMA’s record-setting pace of declarations this year or reserve federal funds for truly catastrophic events and other federal priorities.

Enabling FEMA to hit DEFCON 5 over a tropical storm should require spending cuts.

Obama's FEMA Breaks Disaster Declaration Record

Matt A. Mayer

August 10, 2011

<http://blog.heritage.org/2011/08/10/>

obamas-fema-breaks-disaster-declaration-record

On August 8, President Obama's FEMA issued a disaster declaration for flooding in Utah. With that declaration, FEMA hit 158 declarations in 2011 and in so doing surpassed the 15-year record of 157 declarations, set in 1996 by President Bill Clinton's FEMA, led by James Lee Witt. At this pace, FEMA will end the year with roughly 288 declarations, or almost twice the previous record.

When FEMA issues a declaration, costs shift from the state where the declaration occurred to the federal government—which really means the states where the disaster did not occur are paying for it.

Is the United States Prepared for a “Black Swan”?

Matt A. Mayer

April 8, 2011

<http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2011/04/>

Is-the-United-States-Prepared-for-a-Black-Swan

With the earthquake and tsunami that devastated Japan and the upcoming 10th anniversary of

the September 11 attack, Americans are rightly asking if America could effectively respond to a “Black Swan.” The unfortunate reality is that the uncertainty surrounding the nation's capabilities is so high that few reasonable minds would have confidence in America's ability to minimize the loss of life and property. Instead of waiting for America to fail, Congress should authorize an independent commission to analyze and report on the state of the country's preparedness.

Over-Federalization Means Under-Preparedness. The federalization of routine disasters requires FEMA to become involved with a new disaster somewhere in the United States every 2.5 days. This high operational tempo is affecting FEMA's overall preparedness because it keeps FEMA perpetually in a response mode, leaving little time and few resources for catastrophic preparedness. With staffing levels and budgets only nominally above pre-1993 levels, it should be no surprise that FEMA is not prepared to handle a catastrophic disaster.

This trend serves only to stretch FEMA out even thinner and to allow state and local disaster response resources to atrophy. Congress should reverse this trend as soon as possible.