

Don't eliminate FEMA; reform it



A member of the Missouri Search and Rescue, part of FEMA, speaks on the radio as they unload their gear at a staging area as hurricane Florence starts to make landfall in Leiland, N.C. on Sept. 13, 2018. ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS— AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

BY MARY ELLEN KLAS

BLOOMBERG OPINION

While touring the flood-ravaged areas of North Carolina recently, President Donald Trump declared: “I think we’re going to recommend that FEMA go away.” He then signed an executive order to establish a 20-member “Federal Emergency Management Agency Review Council” to recommend “structural changes” to the agency “and enable national resilience.”

It's not an original thought. Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation project that has become Trump's not-so-secret playbook, recommended shrinking FEMA to focus only on providing aid to states when disasters hit.

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A new review council isn't necessary. There's been no shortage of research and reports on what needs to be done to improve disaster response, emergency management experts tell me. The latest one came from the president's National Infrastructure Advisory Council, which is composed of senior executives from related industries and government. Their draft report, released in December, is thorough and important, but hasn't gotten much attention.

It concludes that FEMA is underfunded and understaffed given what it has been expected to do — handling a new major disaster declaration "every three to four days." And numerous studies have shown that because of regulations to prevent fraud and curb waste, FEMA is a spaghetti bowl of bureaucratic complexity.

The 2024 report suggests that state and local governments are ill-prepared to handle the increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters as well as new threats from malignant actors targeting telecommunications and energy infrastructure. The weaknesses in the nation's system of disaster recovery "are complicated and do not promote resiliency." The solution requires funding FEMA properly, requiring states to share a larger burden of the responsibility, and removing barriers to resilience.

It's no wonder that FEMA has grown to become an enormous agency — disasters, after all, have worsened. According to the agency, the odds of a billion-dollar climate disaster occurring every year have increased 130% compared with previous decades.

Eliminating the federal agency would be irresponsible and would spill a bucket of trouble for states. States like Florida, which has been pummeled by 14 hurricanes in the last decade, are so dependent on the federal government to fund its emergency management operations that the state's Division of Emergency Management is supported almost entirely with federal grants. If Trump cuts those, the rising cost of eggs will be pennies compared to the soaring cost of living in Florida.

Slashing FEMA also could hurt some of Trump's most loyal voters. According to an interactive state-by-state breakdown of non-COVID-19 emergency funding since 2017, FEMA has allocated about \$165 billion for natural disasters, with the largest amounts going to red states. Florida, for example, received \$14.7 billion in non-Covid FEMA funds in that time period and Texas received \$9.4 billion, compared to \$6 billion for California and \$2 billion for North Carolina.

Eliminating FEMA entirely would require an act of Congress. It's unlikely that lawmakers will agree to kill the agency without replacing the money. Beyond the cash, states would also have to figure out how they are going to do what FEMA now handles: stockpiling generators and mobile homes, coordinating case managers, arranging emergency shelters, restoring utility services, managing debris clean-up, and rebuilding affected areas.

But reform could pay off if done properly. Trump could decide to cut federal FEMA jobs and send states the money to hire them directly — with strings attached to promote disaster mitigation, not just recovery.

Mitigation is a good investment. According to an analysis by the National Institute of Building Sciences, every \$1 spent on federal mitigation grants saves \$6 in disaster costs. In 1997, when Bill Clinton was president, FEMA Director James Lee Witt launched Project Impact to focus on creating disaster-resistant communities. With a modest \$20 million budget, it moved people out of earthquake zones and floodplains and encouraged residents to build tornado shelters and retrofit hazard-prone structures.

It worked. After the Red River flooded Grand Forks, Minnesota, FEMA purchased affected buildings and turned the previously developed land into open space that now absorbs flood waters. When the Nisqually earthquake struck the Puget Sound in 2001, homes and schools that had been retrofitted for earthquakes were protected. And when a killer tornado plowed through Manhattan, Kansas, in spring 2008, homes were destroyed but no lives were lost — because people had taken shelter in safe rooms FEMA had helped them build.

Project Impact was discontinued by President George W. Bush, but the idea lives on in at least 28 states and the District of Columbia which have created a position, office, or task force to coordinate disaster mitigation and climate resilience projects, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Craig Fugate, the FEMA director under President Barack Obama, has long argued that the best use of federal funding is to prepare communities for the next disaster.

"I'm not opposed to putting strings on that taxpayer money, as long as it's tied to things that will reduce the future cost of disasters by holding states and local governments more accountable for the decisions they make that continue to spread risk," he said.

Disasters have a habit of messing up a president's political legacy. Perhaps in a time of increasingly frequent climate disasters, Trump would rather wash his hands of all this responsibility. Or maybe he sees cutting FEMA as a way to shrink federal spending. Whatever the reason, given what we know about Trump's preference for populating federal agencies with loyalists and inexperienced administrators, there may be good reason to let states assume more of the burden in disaster emergencies. But it would be a missed opportunity if his council of experts doesn't also convince him to fortify states' emergency response capabilities — so that handling disasters doesn't become another disaster.

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