

Citation:

Robinson, T. (2026, March 13). 100 million in the storm's path. And it's only March. Bright Harbor.
<https://brightharbor.com/blog/100-million-in-the-storm-s-path.-and-it-s-only-march>

THIS WEEK IN DISASTERS

100 Million in the Storm's Path. And It's Only March

Mar 13, 2026



Source: *The Yellow Fire*. Source: *Texas A&M Forest Service*

Plus, at hour one: what local emergency managers need to do before the clock starts

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The news cycle around disaster recovery has grown louder, more anxious, and at times, more misleading. Tony Robinson has watched it happen from both sides of the table, and he wants emergency management professionals to hear something clearly: the infrastructure exists. The systems are there. The panic is not proportional to the reality on the ground.

Robinson serves as Executive Vice President of Disaster Recovery and Policy Initiatives at National Emergency Management and Response (EMR), but his career began at the federal level with FEMA. That dual vantage point, from the corridors of federal policy to the front lines of local response, shapes everything about how he thinks about disaster recovery today.

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That shift is more than philosophical. It is operational.

From Federal Policy to Local Reality

Robinson's time at FEMA gave him a clear-eyed view of how federal policy is designed to function. His work at National EMR showed him how that policy actually works in communities when a tornado touches down or floodwaters rise. The gap between the two, he argues, is not a failure of the system. It is the disconnect between policy development and the realities of operational implementation at the point of impact at the local level.

He has worked through some of the most consequential disasters in modern U.S. history, including Hurricanes Katrina and Harvey, and the Oklahoma tornadoes. Across all of them, one theme has been consistent: the communities that recovered the most effectively were those that invested in preparedness. Based on their risk, they communicated and engaged with their citizens, developed and exercised disaster plans with local, state, tribal and federal partners and identified resource gaps and worked with governmental, nonprofit and private sector organizations to mitigate those gaps.

Relationships Are the Infrastructure

If Robinson has one non-negotiable in emergency management, it is this: Relationships built before a disaster are a lifeline to solve complex problems.

"At hour one, you don't have time to introduce yourself, you need that trusted resource that can deliver results" he said. "That relationship must already exist, those trusted relationships are critical in a time sensitive environment where you need to deliver results."

This applies at every level of government. Local emergency managers need to know the 24-hour contact numbers to request state or mutual aid resources. They must know who are the support enablers at federal or private sector organizations that can provide resources and technical assistance. And most critically, the emergency managers must have deep, standing relationships with the nonprofits and faith-based organizations that are often first on the ground before any government entity arrives.

Robinson is direct about the role these organizations play. They are not supplemental. They are foundational. Many local emergency management departments already have formal integration

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Rebalancing Without Retreating

The ongoing conversation about rebalancing responsibility between federal, state and local government is one Robinson takes seriously, without alarm. His read: local governments have more capacity than they are often given credit for, they are responsible everyday for responding to events in their community.

Resourcefulness, in his framing, is not a workaround. It is a core competency. A strong local emergency manager understands their resources, knows when to call for support, and does not wait for a federal directive to act. The communities most ready to absorb greater local responsibility are those that have already been operating that way.

"The foundation of all of this is knowing what you have before you need it," he said.

What Local Emergency Managers Can Do Differently, Starting Tomorrow

Robinson's message to the local emergency managers reading this is grounded and specific. Do not wait for the disaster to test your relationships. Audit them now. Map your nonprofit and faith-based partners. Know who shows up in the first hour and what they bring. Make sure there is a shared understanding, before anything happens, of where each organization fits in the larger response picture.

Community preparedness, he argues, is not just about stockpiling resources or running tabletop exercises. It is about ensuring in the first minutes of a disaster, no one is asking who is in charge or whom to call.