

# The Creation of FEMA: Historical Context

Op-Ed from a fellow Reader and FEMA Employee



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## FEMA's Creation and State vs. Federal Emergency Management: A Sourced Anal

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was established through Executive Order 12127, signed by President Jimmy Carter on March 31, 1979 (Hadd et al., 2020). This consolidation brought together numerous disaster-related responsibilities previously scattered across the federal government.

According to the Congressional Research Service, prior to FEMA's creation, federal disaster assistance was fragmented across more than 100 federal agencies with unclear jurisdictions and overlapping responsibilities (Lindsay & McCarthy, 2015). This fragmentation resulted in coordination failures during several high-profile disasters in the 1960s and 1970s.

The push toward centralization was driven by both recurring operational failures and increasing political pressure. Disasters such as Hurricane Agnes in 1972 and the Super Outbreak of tornadoes in 1974 revealed the federal government's inability to coordinate timely and effective relief. Moreover, the escalating financial burden of disaster recovery—federal disaster aid had ballooned from roughly \$7 million annually in the 1950s to over \$1 billion by the late 1970s—underscored the unsustainability of the existing decentralized model (Sylves, 2019). President Carter responded by proposing Reorganization Plan No. 3 of 1978, which sought to merge civil defense and natural disaster responsibilities into a comprehensive emergency management agency.

## Key Motivations Behind FEMA's Formation

As documented by the National Academy of Public Administration's comprehensive study "Coping With Catastrophe" (1993), several factors drove the centralization of emergency management:

**Coordination Inefficiencies:** The Government Accountability Office documented systematic response delays and duplications in the fragmented pre-FEMA system (GAO, 1996).

**Fiscal Realities:** According to Sylves' "Disaster Policy and Politics" (2019), growing disaster costs were increasingly exceeding many states' financial capacities, with federal disaster expenditures growing from approximately \$7 million annually in the 1950s to more than \$1 billion annually by the 1970s.

**National Security Integration:** The Cold War necessitated integration of civil defense with natural disaster response (Roberts, 2013).

**Standardization Requirements:** The National Governors Association's 1978 report "Comprehensive Emergency Management" called for consistent frameworks across states to ensure equitable citizen protection (NGA, 1978).

The formation of FEMA represented a pivotal shift in American emergency management philosophy: from a fragmented, reactive system to a more centralized strategic model capable of addressing increasingly interconnected and large-scale threats. Although imperfect in its early implementation, FEMA's creation laid the foundation for the modern federal-state-local coordination framework that remains essential today.

FEMA has gone through many metamorphosis over the decade since its inception.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks fundamentally reshaped FEMA's mission, organizational structure, and its role within the federal government. In the aftermath FEMA was incorporated into the newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2003 as part of a broader national security overhaul. This transition marked a significant shift in FEMA's focus—from an all-hazards emergency management agency to one increasingly oriented toward counterterrorism and homeland defense. As Roberts (2013) and Sylves (2019) argue, this realignment diluted FEMA's traditional disaster response capabilities, redirected funding toward terrorism preparedness, and contributed to coordination challenges that became especially evident during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The integration into DHS also subjected FEMA to additional bureaucratic layers, which many critics argue undermined its agility and operational independence during major disaster operations.

The integration of FEMA into the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) after the 9/11 attacks significantly contributed to the agency's failures during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Following its incorporation into DHS in 2003, FEMA's resources and leadership focus were redirected toward counterterrorism and homeland security priorities, often at the expense of natural disaster preparedness and response capabilities (Roberts, 2013; Tierney, 2014). Critical programs related to mitigation, planning, and coordination were underfunded or deprioritized, and experienced personnel departed amid bureaucratic restructuring. When Katrina struck, FEMA was hampered by diminished autonomy, delayed coordination with state and local

governments, and systemic breakdowns in logistics and communication. The Government Accountability Office (2006) and the White House Katrina Report both concluded that FEMA lacked the capacity and flexibility to respond to a catastrophic natural disaster, revealing how post-9/11 institutional changes had undermined its mission of disaster management.

## Constitutional and Practical Foundations

The U.S. federalist system establishes distinct responsibilities between levels of government. As articulated by FEMA's own "Principles of Emergency Management" and reinforced by the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act:

- States have primary responsibility for emergency management within their borders
- The federal government provides coordinated support when disasters exceed state capabilities
- Local governments maintain first-responder responsibilities

Cornell University's disaster researcher Daniel Aldrich notes that this tiered approach evolved pragmatically over decades as larger disasters repeatedly demonstrated the limitations of purely local or state responses (Aldrich, 2019).

Although the U.S. Constitution does not explicitly mention emergency management powers are divided under the Tenth Amendment, which reserves to the states all powers not delegated to the federal government. This framework places primary responsibility for public safety and disaster response with state and local governments. Contrary to the current administrations statements about how they are "returning the power" to the States, it has always been this way to begin with. States only request federal assistance through Major Disaster Declarations if they are not able to financially and logistically respond to disasters on their own. The federal role in emergency management has evolved through statutes like the **Robert T. Stafford**

Act (1988), which authorizes federal disaster declarations and assistance when requested by a governor or tribal chief executive (Among others but this is the most notable). **The current administration is seeking to amend the Stafford Act, and for states to bare the burden of disaster response alone, even if they need federal assistance.**

## **Why Federal Coordination Remains Essential**

### **Resource Disparities**

The Pew Charitable Trusts' research on state fiscal health (2023) highlights extreme disparities in state emergency management capabilities:

- In FY2022, Wyoming's entire state budget was approximately \$8.8 billion
- By contrast, Hurricane Sandy (2012) caused an estimated \$70.2 billion in damage (NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information, 2023)
- Hurricane Katrina (2005) resulted in approximately \$186.3 billion in damages (adjusted for inflation)

**Resource disparities among states significantly impact their ability to prepare for respond to, and recover from disasters, often resulting in unequal outcomes for affected communities.** States vary widely in terms of emergency management funding, staffing, infrastructure, and administrative capacity. For example, in FY2022, Wyoming's entire state budget was approximately \$8.8 billion—less than one-eighth the estimated \$70.2 billion in damages caused by Hurricane Sandy in 2012 alone (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2023; NOAA NCEI, 2023). **Smaller or rural states frequently lack specialized personnel or equipment, making them reliant on federal support for capabilities such as urban search and rescue, disaster medical teams, and logistical coordination.** These disparities were starkly evident during the 2021 Winter Storm Uri, which overwhelmed Texas's power infrastructure and led to cascading failures across multiple systems. Despite being one of the wealthiest states, Texas struggled

due to a lack of weatherized utilities and inadequate emergency planning, illustrating that both fiscal resources and governance capacity affect disaster resilience (National Emergency Management Association, 2022; GAO, 2021). It should be noted that the current administration plans to deny all disaster declarations for future winter storms which will negatively impact Americans and those who lack the capacity to respond to them.

## Cross-Border Disasters

As documented by the National Emergency Management Association's annual report, multi-state disasters require coordinated response:

- The 2021 Winter Storm Uri impacted Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Mississippi simultaneously
- The 2019 Missouri River and Mississippi River Flooding affected seven states
- The 2020 Western Wildfires crossed numerous state boundaries
- The 2024 Hurricanes Debby, Helene and Milton

According to the Congressional Research Service, 44% of presidentially declared disasters between 2000-2020 involved multiple states (Lindsay, 2021).

In 2024, the United States experienced a series of cross-state disasters that highlight the critical need for federally coordinated emergency response. Among the most devastating was **Hurricane Helene**, which struck the Southeastern U.S. in September causing catastrophic flooding and wind damage across North Carolina and 5 other states on the east coast. The storm resulted in **over 250 confirmed deaths most of which in Western North Carolina**, many due to flash flooding in rural and mountainous areas with limited infrastructure (NOAA NCEI, 2025; FEMA, 2025). **Hurricane Milton** followed weeks later, making landfall along the Gulf Coast and affecting Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. The storm caused **more than 80 fatalities**, largely from storm surge and prolonged power outages during extreme heat.

In the Midwest, **severe flooding in the Ohio River Valley** impacted Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, leading to **at least 45 deaths** and widespread displacement. On the West Coast, **wildfires in California, Oregon, and Washington** destroyed thousands of homes and claimed **dozens of lives**, as fast-moving firestorms crossed jurisdictional boundaries and strained state-level resources. **These disasters demonstrated the complex, multistate nature of modern hazard events and reinforced the importance of FEMA's role in facilitating resource deployment, interstate coordination, and unified incident management across affected regions** (NOAA NCEI, 2025; FEMA, 2025; Congressional Research Service, 2025).

## **Economies of Scale**

Research from the Wharton Risk Management and Decision Processes Center (Michel-Kerjan & Kunreuther, 2018) identifies several economic efficiencies made possible through federally coordinated emergency management. Maintaining specialized national response teams—such as Urban Search & Rescue and Disaster Medical Assistance Teams—at the federal level eliminates the need for each state to develop and fund duplicate capabilities, resulting in significant cost savings.

Centralized procurement through FEMA yields an estimated 23–38% reduction in supply costs compared to decentralized, state-by-state purchasing. Beyond direct savings, federal coordination also enables nationwide resource deployment, reducing idle capacity in unaffected areas while optimizing use during multi-state disasters. This system further promotes interoperability in communications and operational standards, streamlining joint response efforts.

Additionally, FEMA's logistics networks, including the Logistics Supply Chain Management System (LSCMS), facilitate rapid distribution of supplies nationwide—efficiencies that are difficult to replicate at the state level. Federal mitigation programs also contribute to long-term economic resilience; the National Institute of Building Sciences (2019) found that every \$1 invested in hazard mitigation saves an average of \$6 (many argue that the benefit ratio is higher than 6\$) in future disaster

costs. Collectively, these efficiencies underscore the economic rationale for maintaining a centralized federal role in disaster management.

## Impact of Shifting to a Primarily State-Based Model

A return to a primarily state-managed disaster response model would mark a significant departure from the current federalist framework and, according to historical precedent and empirical research, **would likely result in increased disparities, reduced aid availability, and slower response times for disaster survivors**. While proponents of decentralization may argue that states are best positioned to respond to local needs, the evidence indicates that such a shift would exacerbate inequities and weaken national disaster readiness.

One of the most significant projected outcomes of this shift is increased geographic inequity in disaster assistance. Research from the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado found that in the pre-FEMA era, per-capita disaster assistance varied by a factor of three to five between wealthier and poorer states (Tierney, 2019). More recent data from Howell and Elliott (2019), published in *Social Problems*, demonstrates that even with federal programs in place, wealth inequality tends to increase after disasters—implying that disparities would be far worse without standardized federal aid mechanisms. A comparative study conducted by the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware (2018) found that when similar disasters impacted states with differing capacities, recovery timelines varied by 35–60%, available assistance packages differed by 20–50% in total value, and insurance market responses were highly inconsistent, driven by state-level regulatory and resource constraints.

In addition to geographic inequities, the overall volume of disaster assistance would likely be significantly reduced. According to the Congressional Research Service, the federal Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) has provided an average of \$15–20 billion annual

in recent years to support recovery and response operations (Lindsay, 2020). In contrast, budget data compiled by the National Emergency Management Association (2022) indicates that combined state emergency management budgets amount to less than \$4 billion per year, excluding supplemental appropriations. Without federal involvement, programs such as temporary housing assistance, individual grants, and hazard mitigation funding would likely suffer severe reductions. **The Center for American Progress (2016) estimates that overall disaster aid could decrease by 60-70%, placing the greatest burden on communities with the least local capacity to respond.**

**Federal withdrawal would also have substantial consequences for response times and operational coordination (which we are already seeing).** The RAND Corporation's evaluation of national disaster response capabilities concluded that, without FEMA involvement, the deployment of specialized teams such as Urban Search & Rescue and Disaster Medical Assistance Teams would be delayed by an estimated 35 to 48 hours (Jackson et al., 2020). Resource sharing between states would also face significant administrative delays, as FEMA currently provides legal, logistical, and operational support to activate mutual aid through mechanisms like the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC). Additionally, the mobilization of military and federal reserve assets would require new authorization processes, delaying critical capabilities during time-sensitive emergencies.

Collectively, these findings underscore the **dangers of devolving disaster management responsibilities entirely to the state level.** Without federal leadership and investment, disaster response capacity would become highly fragmented, with outcomes determined largely by geography, fiscal health, and political will—rather than by the scale of human need.

## **Historical Precedent**

Prior to the current system, state-centric disaster management showed significant shortcomings:

- The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 demonstrated the failures of state-led responses, leading to the first major federal disaster legislation (Barry, 1998)
- The 1964 Alaska Earthquake recovery, documented by the National Academy of Sciences (1973), highlighted how state resource limitations severely hampered reconstruction
- Hurricane Andrew (1992) revealed coordination failures even with federal involvement, leading to FEMA reforms (GAO, 1993)

*There are many more examples that **COULD** be included in this list*

## Evidence from Current Limited-Federal-Support Scenarios

Evidence from current limited-federal-support scenarios provides critical insight into the potential consequences of shifting away from federally coordinated disaster response. **Not all disasters receive a presidential disaster declaration under the Stafford Act, and when federal assistance is not triggered, the impacts on recovery outcomes are significant.** For disasters that do not receive federal declarations, the Government Accountability Office found that recovery times average 2.4 times longer than comparable federally supported disasters (GAO, 2019).

Similarly, research from the University of Illinois on non-declared disasters shows that average household recovery costs are 3.2 times higher without federal assistance, placing a disproportionate burden on low- and middle-income families (Chandrasekhar & Xiao, 2017). Data from the Small Business Administration further reveals that business recovery rates are 42% lower in disasters lacking federal coordination, underscoring the economic vulnerabilities created when federal resources are unavailable to support local recovery (SBA Office of Disaster Assistance 2020). **These findings demonstrate that the absence of federal involvement not only slows recovery but amplifies financial hardship and deepens disparities across affected communities.**

# Current Hybrid System Benefits

Research from New York University's Wagner School (Comfort et al., 2020) identifies several advantages of the current federalist approach:

- Local knowledge combines with federal resources
- Layered capabilities provide redundancy
- Specialized federal expertise complements state operational control
- National standards ensure baseline protections while allowing state customization

The National Academy of Public Administration's review of emergency management systems (2020) concluded that while improvements are needed, the integrated model delivers more consistent outcomes than either a purely federal or purely state approach.

While this article could be more exhaustive, we would like it to be a basis of understating of the historical context of FFEMA and the ramifications of its dismantling and the reduced approvals of Major Disaster Declarations. As of the this is posted, there are 19 disaster declaration requests pending approval from President Trump, and thousands of survivors waiting for help that may come slow or not at all.

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The Icarian May 22

So the conclusion appears to me that that FEMA is yet another example of taking an effective ag breaking it, and saying "look, it doesn't work." Good job Brownie.

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Rebecca Hamalian    May 21

One of the greatest attacks against "we the people"

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