

STATEMENT
OF
TIMOTHY MANNING

BEFORE
THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AND TECHNOLOGY

FUTURE OF FEMA: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
COMMUNITY

MARCH 4, 2025

Chairman Strong, Ranking Member Kennedy, members of the subcommittee; good morning. I am Tim Manning, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the state of FEMA and emergency management in America. From 2009 to 2017 I served as the Deputy Administrator of FEMA for Protection and National Preparedness, coordinating the nation's efforts to build capabilities to prevent, protect against, mitigate, response, and recover from all emergencies and disasters and acts of terrorism. Prior to joining FEMA, I served in the State of New Mexico's emergency management agency, where after joining as a career civil servant, I later served as State Director of Emergency Management, Secretary of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, and Homeland Security Advisor to the Governor. I've been a local government wildland and urban firefighter and EMT and served in non-governmental emergency response organizations. More recently I served in the White House helping coordinate the response to the COVID19 pandemic. Now, among other roles, I am on the faculty at Georgetown University where I teach courses in the theory and legal frameworks of emergency management. In short, over the past thirty years I have served at all levels of emergency management in operational, policy, and academic roles.

FEMA has never been more called upon and its workforce stretched more thin. A growing frequency of catastrophic disasters and a once in a century pandemic have had widespread impacts on emergency management writ large. This changing hazard landscape and operations tempo is now coupled with indiscriminate firings, regressive changes in policy, and freezes in funding resulting in significant impacts on the nation's preparedness for emergencies, disasters, and potential terrorist attacks and the impacts are far wider than just the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

We're here today to discuss whether FEMA and its programs are adequate to serve the needs of the American people. We're considering the future of FEMA, but I think it is valuable to consider it as the state of emergency management in the United States. It's tempting to look at FEMA as a typical distinct federal agency, with unitary programs and operational capabilities, in a severable fashion. Most federal agencies operate solely within discrete federal authority. FEMA however, does not work in that kind of environment. As we discuss the future of FEMA, I believe we must take a wider, holistic look at the key role FEMA plays Nation's preparedness, the President's directive to study it's potential elimination, the impacts to the workforce from recent and planed indiscriminate firings, the dangers posed by the freezing of critical preparedness assistance, and the blind eye turned to the impacts of a changing climate.

It is important to understand these impacts to FEMA in the context of the American system of emergency management. Unique in our local, state, and federal government relationships, emergency management is a collaborative, mutually supporting system, one where unlike any other crisis response, when the federal government becomes involved, it does *not* assume command and control or exert federal preeminence. In most other crisis situations, for example the FBI in an act of terrorism or the US Coast Guard in an oil spill, the Federal government response is exerting federal authority and assumes legal command and control. In disaster response however, each additional level of governmental involvement comes in support of the impacted community. FEMA's involvement

following a Presidential declaration is one of support to the state, working in partnership. FEMA coordinates the Federal *government's* response, but does not assume command of the overall response. When a crisis exceeds the capabilities of a local government, and they need assistance from beyond their capacity, they request help from the state. And when it exceeds the ability and resources of a state, and the state needs capabilities beyond what any one state can support, they request that help from the President. And on behalf of the President, FEMA is the executor of that assistance.

The Future of FEMA as an Agency

There has been much discussion of late of eliminating FEMA and shifting the responsibility to the states. Aside from the point that the states have always and continue to bear the primary responsibility for disaster response, and who along with their local governments respond to a great deal more emergencies and disasters than FEMA ever gets involved with, an unwinding of FEMA would be an erasing of more than seventy years of learning from mistakes. Our American system of emergency management is born of learning from prior disasters. Prior to the 1950's, federal support to states in disasters was ad-hoc and financial support was strictly the result of congressional emergency action. Following the enactment of the Civil Defense Act and the Federal Disaster Relief Act in 1950, the US government began to be more thoughtful and coordinated in its response, but preparedness and response were still separate, and the structure put the majority of the burden on the states. By the 1970s disaster assistance was still spread among a variety of agencies and federal support was fragmented. This decentralized system was challenging and led to poor responses, so at the urging of southern governors, FEMA was created. Again, learning from what worked and what didn't, a lessons learned approach, drove the federal government to centralize the coordination efforts, creating a more efficient system and empowering an agency to act on behalf of the president in marshaling the resources of the federal. Eliminating or drastically reducing the size and role of FEMA would be intentionally rolling back hard learned lessons, erasing seventy years of reforms rooted in trying to avoid the mistakes of the past.

The very nature of emergency management is preparing for events for which no one level of government or one jurisdiction can manage, either operationally or financially. It was created out of necessity through tragedy and a commitment to learn from the hard-won lessons of the past. The American emergency management system of 2025 is one of intergovernmental collaboration and cooperation to combine forces and efforts to provide for those most in need. If one were to eliminate any one element of that system, one would simply need to recreate it, in whole or in part, and in the meantime suffer the inefficiency and suboptimization that would result.

In recent months, FEMA has undergone unrelenting criticism of its disaster assistance efforts, much of it rooted in misunderstanding and rumors, but also intentional misinformation. This criticism and misinformation has led the administration to discuss eliminating the agency altogether. Identifying those specific elements of law, policy, or grant guidance in need of reform are critical. But it is also important to step back and examine what those impacted by disasters see and what they're dissatisfied with.

In this federalized system, local, state, and federal governments work together, but that is largely transparent and unrecognized by the public. As with every complicated and professional endeavor, the intergovernmental structures and systems of how it all comes together is complicated and nuanced. And that often results in muddled narratives and communication.

Disaster Assistance Reforms and Public Perception

Administratively, emergency managers discuss disaster assistance as “public assistance” (funds to rebuild public infrastructure) or “individual assistance” (funds given to individuals and families to help support their recovery). In many cases, public assistance can be very expensive and take many years; rebuilding roads, bridges, hospitals, and schools can take time, and government contracting and oversight rules to prevent fraud, waste, and abuse can be burdensome.

But often when the public complains about disaster response, “where’s FEMA,” what they are referring to is help to them personally and their property. It’s debris removal, its direct assistance, and its financial assistance, it is individual assistance. Many of the administrative and legal rules, for example the prohibition on duplication of benefits creates challenges many Americans struggle to overcome.

FEMA’s response and recovery programs could be improved with a potential broad review of authorities and limitations, and an overall simplification. While public assistance reforms would benefit state and local government administrative operations, individual assistance reforms would benefit disaster survivors more directly and visibly. The need for reform at FEMA should also include a review of FEMA’s Response assets. FEMA’s operations response capability, its logistics distribution and its field teams such as the 28 Urban Search and Rescue teams it sponsors and Mobile Emergency Response System disaster emergency communications units need augmentation. The significant increase in the amount of disasters that require these assets has not kept up with resources provided for maintenance, replacement, training, and staffing. As a nation we have benefited from the dedication, professionalism, and technical skills of these professionals to always make it work.

FEMA’s Workforce

Another lesson learned from previous disasters is reflected in FEMA’s workforce structure. For its mission, FEMA is relatively small. According to OPM data, FEMA is roughly half the size of ICE and a quarter the size of Customs and Border Protection. FEMA has no helicopters, airplanes, or heavy machinery, its strength is in its people. FEMA’s role is that of a conductor of an orchestra, marshaling the whole of the federal government’s resources to support the needs of a state. The recent firing of the agency’s Chief Financial Officer and line-level grants management staff for simply managing a Congressionally authorized and appropriated program had a dramatic chilling effect. And the indiscriminate firing of a wide range of people on probationary status impacted moral and operational capacity even more. With statements from the Administration of even more firings forthcoming, rumored to be targeting the Resilience side of the agency in particular, FEMA is truly at a tipping point. There have been suggestions that non-response personnel may not be critical. However, as is true across the emergency management profession, every FEMA employee has a disaster response

role- whether someone's day job is managing terrorism grants, or flood insurance, or instructing classes in bioterrorism response, everyone in FEMA has a second job assignment in which they support a disaster response. They may work in the National Response Coordination Center, or deploy down range to support survivors, or work hand in hand with state and local officials.

Grant Funding

Recent freezes and slowdowns in grant funding is also hurting American preparedness for terrorist attacks and disasters. FEMA acts as the US government's channel of fiscal support to State and local governments. FEMA's grants program directorate is how the Department of Homeland Security supports state and local terrorism preparedness, border security, and law enforcement efforts through the State Homeland Security Grant Program, Urban Area Security Initiative, and Law Enforcement Terrorism Prevention Program. For years, DHS's support to state homeland security border security efforts, through Operation Stonegarden, came through FEMA. More recently, as DHS' granting arm to state and local governments, FEMA was asked to operate a CBP program in support of state and local government migrant operations. Like the Urban Area Security grants, these funds are appropriated and managed separately from the Disaster Relief Fund and administered by different parts of the organization. Nevertheless, those differences were blurred, intentionally or unintentionally, resulting in doubt being sewed in the public eye, and the firing of long serving, highly qualified and critical personnel. Freezes and uncertainty in FEMA grant funding and impacts to its people harms our security.

In the disaster risk reduction space, FEMA's mitigation grants such as the pre-disaster BRIC program and the post-disaster Hazard Mitigation Grant Program support communities efforts to lessen their vulnerability to disasters, and have dramatic returns on investment, saving up to thirteen dollars on disaster costs for every dollar invested according to a 2020 National Institute of Building Sciences study.

Another program administered by FEMA is the Emergency Management Performance Grant, a 50/50 match grant that's been described as the backbone of emergency management in America. EMPG is the program that supports the vast majority of state and local government emergency management programs from emergency operations centers to preparedness and response teams, and disaster training and exercises. Without it, few states and local governments could support the level of preparedness and response that America currently enjoys. And in the context of current policy debates of a smaller or no FEMA, it's hard to envision a greater share of the operational responsibility being undertaken by states in its absence.

Climate Change Adaptation

There are also a number of policy changes that have and will continue to have wide-reaching impacts. A core part of any emergency management system, indeed any public administrative or budgeting effort, is a understanding of the environment in which one is working and the base-level requirements. As simple as how many fire companies or ambulances do I need or how many police officers: what are the operational expectations of me, what hazards I am dealing with, and what do I need to respond.

Understanding the population size, road networks, and hospital locations will drive the number of ambulance crews a city would support. Change to any of those variables will change how many ambulances. In emergency management, core to that effort is an understanding of the impacts of natural hazards on our communities. We often think of those events in terms of “return periods”, often referred to as “100 year” events, or those storms that have a one percent chance of occurring in any year. Those calculations are based on the number of events of similar scale over the period of record, converted to a probability, and forecasted into the future. Our challenge is the base data of those calculations are changing. A changing climate is resulting in a growing number of more intense storms and greater rainfall. The result is, as we see over and over in the media, more storms of greater intensity than would be predicted by historic data. We see over and over headlines of record events, multiple 100 year storms a year, and even 500 year and 1,000 year events. Consideration of these changing storm patterns is considered “climate change” and prohibited by policy and threat of termination. To maintain a policy that the emergency management community cannot plan for the world in which we live, where lives are at risk, is tantamount to instructing the Department of Defense to ignore strategic threats and intentionally underprepare.

Mr. Chairman, in 2007, almost twenty years ago, I was here testifying before a different House committee on this same issue – was FEMA and DHS structured correctly and were the dramatic unilateral changes put in at that time responsible for poor emergency cooperation and coordination. Was there a more optimal way for states and the federal government to work together to protect our fellow citizens. Congress passed reforms, and the Administration at that time listened. In the ensuing decades the nation has in fact made dramatic improvements. We developed more cooperative national doctrine. Congresses’ investments in capabilities through grants and legislative reform has resulted in a more prepared communities, mitigated disasters, and provide more effective response. It’s saved lives. The administrative burden on state and local governments in public assistance is still challenging and slow to implement, and the individual assistance provided to people and families is complicated and often less than anticipated by the public. Reforms to those programs could be greatly beneficial. But there should be no question of the need for a single federal coordinating agency, working with Governors and their single state-level coordinating agencies. Progress in emergency management is based on learning lessons and adapting and growing capabilities. We have both the opportunity and responsibility at this point in time to learn from recent disasters, and grow our ability to support each other, not regress to the uncoordinated and chaotic early 1970’s and before.