
FEMA's response to Texas flood slowed by Noem's cost controls

By [Gabe Cohen](#) and [Michael Williams](#), CNN

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Washington (CNN) — As monstrous floodwaters surged across central Texas late last week, officials at the Federal Emergency Management Agency leapt into action, preparing to deploy critical search and rescue teams and life-saving resources, like they have in countless past disasters.

But almost instantly, FEMA ran into bureaucratic obstacles, four officials inside the agency told CNN.

As CNN has previously reported, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem — whose department oversees FEMA — recently enacted a sweeping rule aimed at cutting spending: Every contract and grant over \$100,000 now requires her personal sign-off before any funds can be released.

For FEMA, where disaster response costs routinely soar into the billions as the agency contracts with on-the-ground crews, officials say that threshold is essentially “pennies,” requiring sign-off for relatively small expenditures.

In essence, they say the order has stripped the agency of much of its autonomy at the very moment its help is needed most.

“We *were* operating under a clear set of guidance: lean forward, be prepared, anticipate what the state needs, and be ready to deliver it,” a longtime FEMA official told CNN. “That is not as clear of an intent for us at the moment.”

For example, as central Texas towns were submerged in rising waters, FEMA officials realized they couldn’t pre-position Urban Search and Rescue crews from a network of teams stationed regionally across the country.

In the past, FEMA would have swiftly staged these teams, which are specifically trained for situations including catastrophic floods, closer to a disaster zone in anticipation of urgent requests, multiple agency sources told CNN.

But even as Texas rescue crews raced to save lives, FEMA officials realized they needed Noem’s approval before sending those additional assets. Noem didn’t authorize FEMA’s deployment of Urban Search and Rescue teams until Monday, more than 72 hours after the flooding began, multiple sources told CNN.

Homeland Security officials have defended the federal response in Texas and President Donald Trump's plan to dismantle FEMA and shift more responsibility for disaster response to states.

Tricia McLaughlin, a DHS spokeswoman, told CNN that Noem did not need to authorize additional FEMA resources initially because the department used other DHS search and rescue assets. She added that over time, as a need for FEMA resources arose, those requests received Noem's approval.

"FEMA is shifting from bloated, DC-centric dead weight to a lean, deployable disaster force that empowers state actors to provide relief for their citizens," McLaughlin told CNN in a statement. "The old processes are being replaced because they failed Americans in real emergencies for decades."

Other homeland security components have assisted, including the US Coast Guard and Customs and Border Protection.

One Texas state official told CNN that the Texas emergency management division has been interacting with FEMA "in the way we always do for disasters like this." The official added that Texas has "quite a bit of capabilities" related to disaster management on its own.

But the additional red tape required at FEMA added another hurdle to getting critical federal resources deployed when hours counted.





Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem discusses the ongoing search and rescue efforts after recent flooding along the Guadalupe River during a press conference in Kerrville, Texas, on Saturday. Rodolfo Gonzalez/AP

Texas did request aerial imagery from FEMA to aid search and rescue operations, a source told CNN, but that was delayed as it awaited Noem's approval for the necessary contract.

FEMA staff have also been answering phones at a disaster call center, where, according to one agency official, callers have faced longer wait times as the agency awaited Noem's approval for a contract to bring in additional support staff.

The chaos has exposed a deeper uncertainty within FEMA about its ability to respond, its mission, and its authority under the Trump administration — just as hurricane and wildfire seasons have gotten underway. Officials within FEMA warn that if the disaster had spanned a larger area and multiple states, the confusion and delays could have been even more severe.

For months, FEMA officials have been warning that the agency is unprepared amid a mass exodus of experienced emergency managers and the looming threat of the agency being dismantled.

CNN has reached out to FEMA for comment.

Difficult scenes, different model

After the skies over central Texas opened up and caused waters to rise more than 23 feet in under an hour in the early morning hours of Friday, dozens were swept away in the raging flood waters that surged around the Guadalupe River where campers and merrymakers had been looking forward to the Independence Day weekend.

Five days later, the death toll of nearly 120 people continues to climb. More than 160 are still missing.

Trump approved a major disaster declaration for Texas on Sunday, July 6.

By Monday night, only 86 FEMA staffers had been deployed, according to internal FEMA data seen by CNN — a fraction of the typical response for a disaster of this scale.

By Tuesday night, the federal response expanded to 311 staffers deployed, the data showed.

Multiple FEMA officials told CNN that they were taken aback by the agency's relatively limited response in the immediate aftermath of the disaster.

The tragedy in Texas has made one thing clear: The buck now stops with Noem.

Her office has delegated little authority to acting FEMA Administrator David Richardson, who, as of Wednesday morning, has yet to visit Texas since the flooding began, multiple FEMA officials told CNN.

"DHS and its components have taken an all-hands-on-desk approach to respond to recovery efforts in Kerrville. FEMA has deployed extensive staff to support Texas response and recovery operations based on staff skills and requirements," McLaughlin told CNN.

The agency has activated its regional response center in Austin and sent a liaison officer to Kerrville, she said.

"DHS is rooting out waste, fraud, abuse, and is reprioritizing appropriated dollars. Secretary Noem is delivering accountability to the U.S. taxpayer, which Washington bureaucrats have ignored for decades at the expense of American citizens."

Texas, which has one of the most robust emergency management systems in the country, has managed this disaster largely on its own and leaned on its state and local search and rescue teams in the early hours of the disaster. More than 2,100 people have been deployed across 20 state agencies, Gov. Greg Abbott's office has said.

To bolster the response at the outset, officials in Texas turned to the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), a mutual aid agreement between states to share resources during disasters.

At least one state requested a guarantee that FEMA would cover the steep costs and potential damage to equipment, a promise the federal agency couldn't make on the spot, though the issue was quickly resolved, two sources with knowledge of the matter told CNN.

All of this raises questions over the vision of emergency management Trump has laid out several times during this administration, in which states bear the brunt of the responsibility for disaster relief and FEMA is eventually "phased out."

On Wednesday, Noem, his DHS secretary, called for the agency to be eliminated and remade after telling reporters the previous day: "We, as a federal government, don't manage these disasters. The state does."

"We come in and support them. and that's exactly what we did in this situation." she said.

Trump said: “You had people there as fast as anybody’s ever seen.”

This story has been updated with additional information.

CNN’s Melanie Hicken, Riane Lumer, Max Rego, Connor Greene, Sylvie Kirsch and Maria Moctezuma contributed to this report.

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