

The Guardian:

Deadly floods could be new normal as Trump guts federal agencies, experts warn

Trump's 'cuts and chaos' to agencies are opposite of what's needed for era of worsening weather disasters, experts say

[Nina Lakhani](#) and [Oliver Milman](#)

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The deadly Texas floods could signal a new norm in the US, as [Donald Trump](#) and his allies dismantle crucial federal agencies that help states prepare and respond to extreme weather and other hazards, experts warn.

More than 100 are dead and dozens more remain missing after flash floods in the parched area known as Texas Hill Country swept away entire holiday camps and homes on Friday night – in what appears to have been another unremarkable storm that stalled before dumping huge quantities of rain over a short period of time, a phenomenon that has becoming increasingly common as the planet warms.

It remains unclear why the early warning system failed to result in the timely evacuation of Camp Mystic, where 700 girls were camped on a known flood plain on the Guadalupe River, but there is mounting concern that the chaos and cuts instigated by Trump and his billionaire donor Elon Musk at the National Weather Service (NWS) and Federal Emergency Management Agency (Fema) may have contributed to the death toll.

“This is the exact kind of storm that meteorologists, climate scientists, emergency management experts have been talking about and warning about for decades at this point, and there’s absolutely no reason that this won’t happen in other parts of the country. This is what happens when you let climate change run unabated and break apart the emergency management system – without investing in that system at the local and state level,” said [Samantha Montano](#), professor of emergency management at Massachusetts Maritime Academy.

“It takes a lot of money, expertise and time to eliminate risk and make sure that agencies are prepared to respond when a flood situation like in Texas happens. And if you eliminate those preparedness efforts, if you fire the people who do that work, then the response will not be effective.”

Fema was created in 1979 by Jimmy Carter – precisely because states were struggling to cope with major disasters – and works closely with state and local government agencies to provide resources, coordination, technical expertise, leadership and communication with the public when they cannot cope alone.

Upon returning to the White House, Trump immediately began threatening to disband Fema, belittling the agency amid its ongoing efforts to help communities devastated by the Los Angeles [wildfires](#) and [Hurricane Helene](#), the category 4 storm [that left at least 230 people dead in southern Appalachia](#).

The threats were followed by a pledge to dismantle Fema at the end of the 2025 hurricane season, without offering any clear plan about what would come next. The cuts are part of the administration's unsubstantiated claims that the states and private enterprises are capable and best positioned to provide most federal services including weather forecasting, scientific research and emergency management.

[Reports suggest](#) that more than a third of Fema's permanent full-time workforce has been fired or accepted buyouts, including some of its most experienced and knowledgeable leaders who coordinate disaster responses – which can involve multiple federal agencies for months or years.

Emergency management and the weather service work hand in hand. At the NWS, more than 600 people have already been laid off or taken early retirement, leading to offices across storm and flood-prone areas of the US to be [short](#) of meteorologists and round-the-clock staffing cover. The agency has also had to scale back routine weather monitoring.

Two senior meteorologists at the San Antonio NWS office, which is responsible for forecasting in the Hill Country region, were among the casualties of Musk's buyouts and layoffs. This included the warning coordination meteorologist, who is usually responsible for liaising with local emergency managers to help translate NWS forecasts into likely impacts that inform local actions such as warnings and evacuation orders.

But Trump said it was unlikely the staff cuts to the NWS will be reversed, even in the wake of the Texas floods. "I would think not," the president said on Sunday about a possible reversal. "This was a thing that happened in seconds. Nobody expected it. Nobody saw it. Very talented people are there, they didn't see it."

Accuweather, the popular commercial weather forecasting services, relies on the NWS for much of its foundational meteorological data and forecasts. Fema often steps in to cover emergency accommodation and reconstruction costs for Americans without adequate insurance and/or the means to rebuild.

Reports suggest NWS weather balloons, which assess storm risk by measuring wind speed, humidity, temperature and other conditions that satellites may not detect, have been canceled in recent weeks from Nebraska to Florida due to [staff shortages](#). At the busiest time for storm predictions, deadly heatwaves and wildfires, weather service staffing is down by more than 10% and, for the first time in almost half a century, some forecasting offices no longer have 24/7 cover.

In May, the NWS office in eastern Kentucky scrambled to cover the overnight forecast as severe storms moved through the region, triggering [multiple tornadoes that eventually killed 28 people](#). Despite such threats, the Republican budget bill signed by Trump last week cuts \$150m in funding to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Noaa) to help improve future weather forecasts and also shrinks the amount of money to the National Science Foundation, the premier federal agency supporting basic science and engineering research, by 56% next year.

The 2026 budget makes significant cuts to NOAA including terminating the Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research, which in essence could be the end of the efforts to improve warnings for events like the Texas floods, warned Alan Gerard, former head of the Warning Research and Development Division of the NOAA National Severe Storms Laboratory, speaking on DemocracyNow! on Monday.

NSF funded research has played a pivotal role in developing early warning systems for all sorts of hazards, but more work is urgently needed to improve local accuracy and community acceptability amid the growing threats due to global heating. There is no other funding source capable of filling this gap.

“The Hill Country is a desert area with big rivers which have had historic major floods and that are prone to flash flooding – but like most of rural America do not have gauge systems. Without gauges, the warnings don’t come early enough, and with flash floods every 15 minutes can save lives. This is something we can do better,” said Ryan Thigpen, a flood scientist trying to improve early warning systems in Appalachia .

Texas senator Ted Cruz has called for “a better system of warnings to get kids out of harm’s way” in the wake of the disaster, even though he inserted language into the “big beautiful” bill to slash NOAA’s weather forecasting upgrades. Local officials, too, have sought to distract attention away from Trump’s cuts – and their support for his plans – but the lack of leadership at FEMA is impossible to ignore especially as Trump plans to visit the area with the secretary of homeland security, Kristi Noem, on Friday.

David Richardson, the acting administrator of FEMA, has not traveled to Texas. Richardson, a former US marine with no emergency management experience prior to his appointment in May, is most notable for his [warning to agency staff](#) to not oppose Trump’s plan for FEMA or “I will run right over you.”

“A lot of key people at FEMA who worked there for years, decades in many cases, and hold the expertise that is needed to be able to actually move the resources of the agency, are gone. FEMA is so depleted, it’s unclear if they are even capable of launching a huge response right now,” said Montano, author of [Disasterology: Dispatches from the Frontlines of the Climate Crisis](#).

“It’s not the same level as during [hurricane] Helene but there’s already a lot of inaccurate information out there, and FEMA is no longer a trusted voice – we haven’t heard from the administrator, only secretary of homeland security Kristi Noem, which is very unusual. We’re almost at the point where we can say no one’s home at FEMA... there is no trusted voice,” Montano added.

The turmoil at the federal agencies tasked with predicting and responding to disaster comes as the threat from extreme weather grows due to the human-caused climate crisis. The Texas floods occurred in a warmer, more moisture-laden atmosphere than in the past, with

one [analysis](#) finding that climate change has made conditions 7% wetter and 1.5C hotter than they would've been otherwise.

“We have added a lot of carbon to the atmosphere, and that extra carbon traps energy in the climate system,” said Andrew Dessler, a climate scientist at Texas A&M University. “Because of this extra energy, every weather event we see now carries some influence from climate change. The only question is how big that influence is.”

Meanwhile on Monday the White House [described](#) the deadly Texas floods as “an act of God”.

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ENVIRONMENT

In Texas flood response, a scaled-back FEMA gets an early test



Ashley Landis/AP

An American flag is placed on a stump amid debris in Kerrville, Texas, July 8, 2025.



By Patrik Jonsson, Staff writer

July 09, 2025, 3:24 p.m. ET

As the response on the ground in Texas shifts from rescue to recovery efforts, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's ability to provide timely aid to states is once again front and center.

The Texas tragedy – in which flash flooding over the Fourth of July weekend left more than 100 dead, including 36 children, with more than 170 still missing – comes amid a widening debate over the federal government's role in responding to natural disasters and whether to revamp or even dismantle FEMA.

On Sunday, just weeks after pledging to dissolve the agency, President Donald Trump declared the flood zone in Texas a major disaster, activating FEMA resources and releasing funds to help with rescue and recovery operations. Speaking to reporters, the president said that now wasn't the time to discuss FEMA's future.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

The Trump administration has reduced the staff of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and scaled back the amount of aid it delivers, saying states should take on a bigger role. How it handles the Texas flooding disaster could shape the future direction of federal disaster response.

“FEMA is something we can talk about later,” the president said.

Since Mr. Trump took office, however, the agency's staff has reportedly been reduced by as much as 25%, as a result of buyouts and layoffs instituted by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). FEMA's former acting

administrator was pushed out in May after he testified before Congress that he did not think the agency should be eliminated.



Evan Vucci/AP

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem (left) speaks during a Cabinet meeting with President Donald Trump (far right) at the White House in Washington, July 8, 2025. "We, as a federal government, don't manage these disasters; the state does," she said.

At a Cabinet meeting Tuesday, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said the administration was "streamlining" FEMA, emphasizing that the state of Texas was leading the response on the ground, with the federal government playing a supporting role. The New York Times reported that many current and former FEMA officials characterized the federal presence in Texas as notably smaller than what they would have expected for a disaster of this magnitude.

Conservatives have criticized FEMA in recent years for inefficiencies and layers of red tape that they say make it difficult for survivors to access support. Still, others contend that while FEMA might need to be revamped, the agency is playing an ever

more crucial role, as states struggle to meet the rising costs and challenges of natural disasters, now occurring with more frequency and severity.

The agency's response to immense flooding in the Texas Hill Country may offer a window into how a reimagined FEMA under the Trump administration will operate, as the federal government looks to scale back its role.

"The Texas flooding is a focusing event," says Susan Cutter, co-director of the Hazards Vulnerability & Resilience Institute at the University of South Carolina. "It gives us a path forward or not – a path that we take collectively, or we start going down the road of a piecemeal response."

Mr. Trump has long criticized FEMA as a politicized behemoth that has lost track of its mission. "FEMA has been a very big disappointment," the president said during a visit in January to North Carolina, where mountain communities are still recovering from destruction caused by last year's Hurricane Helene. "It's very bureaucratic, and it's very slow."

The president has criticized the agency's response to the Los Angeles wildfires and Hurricane Helene, which left at least 230 people dead in southern Appalachia. The agency is reportedly behind schedule in processing emergency grants, many of which have been paused or canceled as part of budget cuts.

"We've been ghosted by FEMA," Robert Wike Graham, deputy director of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Emergency Management, told CNN last week, describing the agency's lack of response to requests for information about his North Carolina community.

Nine months after Helene's historic floods devastated many North Carolina mountain communities, most of the region is back open for business. But almost half of the state's population, 43%, said FEMA's response was poor or very poor, according to recent polling.

Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters

Homes and businesses damaged by flooding from Hurricane Helene last September were still in disrepair as of April 7, 2025, in Bat Cave, North Carolina. Nearly half of North Carolinians said the Federal Emergency Management Agency's response was poor or very poor, according to polling.

Critics also accuse FEMA of mission creep, as the agency's operations expanded beyond handling logistics and cutting checks in the wake of disasters. It was involved in much of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has played a role in migrant housing. FEMA even "trains agencies on how to police protests – and they don't do it well," says Edward Maguire, a criminologist at Arizona State University in Tempe. These expanding roles have often come without additional resources.

While it's not uncommon for Washington to deny petitions for disaster relief funds, under President Trump FEMA has refused requests after tornadoes in Arkansas and flooding in West Virginia. The agency also eliminated funding for hazard mitigation, including money for elevating or demolishing flood-prone homes, and strengthening buildings in hurricane and earthquake zones.

Yet as the Trump administration shifts more costs of and responsibilities for managing disasters onto the states, some worry about disparate outcomes. Wyoming officials say their recent requests for information about federal funds, which make up almost all of the state's emergency management budget, have gone unanswered.

Texas, which spent \$547 million this year on improving its emergency preparedness, has been requesting assistance from Washington for its communities affected by rainfall and flooding since this past spring. With this latest flood, Gov. Greg Abbott requested an emergency declaration to mobilize FEMA.

Ms. Noem told reporters Tuesday that the FEMA response in Texas was the model for the agency moving forward.

“We, as a federal government, don’t manage these disasters; the state does,” she said. “We come in and support them.” As soon as the president approved the disaster declaration for Texas, she said, “We were able to get them resources and dollars right away ... through state block grants, to help them with cleanup.”

On Wednesday, the FEMA Review Council, a task force set up by President Trump to recommend changes to the agency’s structure, held its second meeting.

“Reforming FEMA is not nearly as simple as it should be,” Ms. Noem said in her opening remarks.

Founded in 1979 by President Jimmy Carter, FEMA was itself originally an effort to streamline the U.S. emergency response, by consolidating several existing federal disaster-related agencies. In 2003, the agency was transferred to the newly formed Department of Homeland Security.

Over the past 30 years, it has spent an average of \$12 billion per year dealing with disasters across the country, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Ashley Landis/AP

Search-and-rescue teams from the Kerrville Fire Department walk past debris after flooding near the banks of the Guadalupe River in Kerrville, Texas, July 8, 2025.

Eliminating FEMA entirely would require an act of Congress. But already, many FEMA operations have been paused or eliminated, according to May testimony from the Natural Resources Defense Council to Congress.

The Trump administration has considered changing policies to make it more difficult for states to receive funding after disasters, according to Bloomberg News, which cited an internal agency memo from March. The proposed changes, which

include limiting long-term housing assistance and halting enrollment in the National Flood Insurance Program, would amount to a dramatic reduction in the federal government's role in disaster response.

FEMA's command center director, in charge of coordinating flood responses, resigned in June after Mr. Trump announced plans to phase out the agency. States are now expected to share more of the recovery costs and must request assistance directly from the Oval Office.

This every-state-for-itself approach was once the norm, says Robert Griffin, a former Homeland Security undersecretary. But starting in the mid-20th century, "The level of devastation of some of these events surpassed the capacity of the states and locals to respond, recover, and rebuild. It called out for a national presence."

FEMA was formed in part "to bring unique federal resources that locals can't afford: the fleets of helicopters, the search-and-rescue teams, the mortuary teams, the medical support teams," says Professor Griffin, who now serves as founding dean of the College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security and Cybersecurity at the University at Albany.

Now, as the federal government scales back its role, he says, it raises questions about how the president will decide which states get aid and which don't – and what will happen to the states with fewer resources, if they are denied federal aid.

Editor's note: This story was updated, on the same day of publication, to correct the name of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

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As FEMA aids Texas flood victims, Noem urges eliminating US agency 'as it exists today'

Reuters

my news



U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem speaks about the Federal Emergency Management Agency next to U.S. President Donald Trump, in the Oval Office at the White House, in Washington,...

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Summary Companies

Noem says FEMA has been too slow in responding to crises
FEMA advocates say agency plays crucial role in disaster relief
FEMA deploys personnel to central Texas following deadly floods

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Speaking at a meeting of a government review council looking at ways to reform FEMA, Noem noted that the agency had provided resources, including search and recovery personnel, to aid state and local officials in Texas leading the response.

But Noem, who chairs the council, also took the opportunity to blast FEMA for what she called numerous past failures. She said the agency moves too slowly and ties up state and local officials in bureaucracy.

"Federal emergency management should be state and locally led, rather than how it has operated for decades," she said.

"It has been slow to respond at the federal level. It's even been slower to get the resources to Americans in crisis, and that is why this entire agency needs to be eliminated as it exists today, and remade into a responsive agency."

Defenders of FEMA have said President Donald Trump and his aides have sought to politicize a vital agency that helps states prepare for natural disasters like hurricanes and floods and clean up in the aftermath.

Michael Coen, FEMA chief of staff for former Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden, called Noem's remarks "disappointing" and noted that flood-stricken people in Texas were "still searching for loved ones with the support of the federal government."

White House spokesperson Abigail Jackson said Trump was "empowering" states "to invest in their own resilience before disaster strikes" and that policy discussions over what role the federal government should play in disasters would continue.

FATE OF FEMA UNCLEAR

The Texas floods, the first major deadly disaster since Trump took office in January vowing to gut or abolish FEMA, were a stark reminder of the extent to which states lean on the agency during a disaster. Trump and Noem have yet to explain exactly how FEMA should be remade and how its operations would differ from how it operates today.

In Kerr County, where the vast majority of the victims died, local officials have faced mounting questions about whether they could have done more to warn residents as the floodwaters rose.

FEMA has deployed search and rescue teams from five states to Kerr County, sent an array of experts and supplies to augment the state's emergency headquarters in Austin and authorized activation of the Army Corps of Engineers, according to the agency's daily operations briefing.

Last month Trump said he would start "phasing out" FEMA after the current hurricane season, which lasts through November. He said states would receive less federal aid for disasters, with the White House controlling distribution of funds.

FEMA also plays an ongoing role in funding state emergency capabilities. In the previous fiscal year, Texas received nearly \$20 million from FEMA to help pay for the emergency management operations now at the forefront of the flood response.

Trump has frequently said he wants states to have primary responsibility for responding to disasters, but his comments following the Texas floods have been more muted on that topic.

When asked by a reporter on Sunday whether he still planned to phase out FEMA, Trump responded that it was a topic "we can talk about later."

On Monday, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt was similarly guarded, telling reporters that federal government disaster response was a "policy discussion that will continue."

Coen said he was encouraged by Trump's and Leavitt's remarks.

"They both seem to realize the importance of the moment," he said, adding he hoped the Texas disaster would serve as "an opportunity to maybe look at things differently."

Reporting by Nathan Layne and Maria Tsvetkova in New York, and by Ted Hesson and Courtney Rozen in Washington; Editing by Ross Colvin, David Gregorio and Cynthia Osterman

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Trump visits Texas flood zone, defends government's disaster response

883 words

11 July 2025

19:50

Reuters News

LBA

English

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KERRVILLE, Texas (Reuters) -President Donald Trump defended the state and federal response to deadly flash flooding in Texas on Friday as he visited the stricken Hill Country region, where at least 120 people, including dozens of children, perished a week ago.

During a roundtable discussion after touring Kerr County, the epicenter of the disaster, Trump praised both Texas Governor Greg Abbott and Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem for their response, saying they both did an "incredible job."

The Trump administration, as well as local and state officials, has faced mounting questions over whether more could have been done to protect and warn residents ahead of the flooding, which struck with astonishing speed in the pre-dawn hours on July 4, the U.S. Independence Day holiday.

Trump reacted with anger when a reporter said some families affected by the floods had expressed frustration that warnings did not go out sooner.

"I think everyone did an incredible job under the circumstances," he said. "I don't know who you are, but only a very evil person would ask a question like that."

Some critics have questioned whether the administration's spending cuts at the National Weather Service and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which coordinates the U.S. government's disaster response efforts, might have exacerbated the calamity.

Trump officials have said that cuts had no impact on the NWS's ability to forecast the storms, despite some vacancies in local offices.

But the president has largely sidestepped questions about his plans to shrink or abolish FEMA and reassign many of its key functions to state and local governments.

"I'll tell you some other time," Trump said on Tuesday, when asked by a reporter about FEMA.

Before the most recent flooding, Kerr County declined to install an early-warning system after failing to secure state money to cover the cost.

Lawrence Walker, 67, and a nearly three-decade veteran resident of Kerrville, said the county and state had not spent enough on disaster prevention, including an early-warning system.

Asked about the quality of the government response, he said, "It's been fine since the water was at 8 feet."

The Texas state legislature will convene in a special session later this month to investigate the flooding and provide disaster relief funding.

Abbott has dismissed questions about whether anyone was to blame, calling that the "word choice of losers."

DOZENS STILL UNACCOUNTED FOR

Search teams on Friday were still combing through muddy debris littering parts of the Hill Country in central Texas, looking for the dozens still listed as missing, but no survivors have been found since the day of the floods.

Heavy rains sent a wall of water raging down the Guadalupe River early on July 4, causing the deadliest disaster of the Republican president's nearly six-month term in office.

As sun poked through dark clouds on Friday morning, search crews in hard hats painstakingly walked inch-by-inch along the ruined banks of the river, marking damage and looking through wreckage.

After the president arrived in Kerr County in the early afternoon, Trump, first lady Melania Trump and Texas Governor Greg Abbott drove to an area near the river, where Trump received a briefing from first responders amid debris left in the wake of the flood.

The county is located in what is known as "flash flood alley," a region that has seen some of the country's deadliest floods.

More than a foot of rain fell in less than an hour on July 4. Flood gauges showed the river's height rose from about a foot to 34 feet (10.4 meters) in a matter of hours, cascading over its banks and sweeping away trees and structures in its path.

Kerr County officials say more than 160 people remain unaccounted for, although experts say that the number of people reported missing in the wake of disasters is often inflated.

The dead in the county include 67 adults and at least 36 children, many of whom were campers at the nearly century-old Camp Mystic, an all-girls Christian summer retreat on the banks of the river.

Jon Moreno, 71, a longtime Kerrville resident whose property on high ground was spared, praised the government response - local and federal.

He has heard the debate about what more could have been done - including sirens - but said he did not think it would have made much difference, given people's desire to build along the flood-prone riverbanks.

"It's unavoidable," he said. "All those people along the river - I wouldn't want to live there... It's too dangerous."

At Stripes, a gas station in Kerrville, the building was tagged in large white letters, accusing "Trump's Big Beautiful Bill" of cutting "our emergency funding."

The president's massive legislative package, which cut taxes and spending, won approval from the Republican-controlled Congress last week and was signed into law by Trump on the same day that the flooding hit Texas.

(Reporting by Trevor Hunnicutt and Maria Alejandra Cardona in Kerrville; Additional reporting by Nicole Johnson, Kevin Lamarque and Rich McKay; Writing by Joseph Ax; Editing by Frank McGurty, Nick Zieminski and Diane Craft)

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Noem defends FEMA response to Texas floods amid scrutiny

By **Ted Hesson** and **Nathan Layne**

July 13, 2025 7:35 PM EDT · Updated July 13, 2025



[1/2] A person uses machinery to clear debris along the banks of the Guadalupe River after catastrophic floods in Center Point, Texas, U.S., July 11, 2025. REUTERS/Sergio Flores/File Photo [Purchase Licensing Rights](#)



Summary

- Noem denies FEMA spending cap slowed response
- Trump administration considers rebranding FEMA amid scrutiny
- Texas floods highlight FEMA staffing and response challenges

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Reuters) - Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem on Sunday defended FEMA's response to [deadly floods in Texas](#) last week, saying her agency acted swiftly and that Texas officials had praised the administration's actions.

During an interview on NBC News' "Meet the Press," Noem denied that a memo she issued in June requiring her to approve FEMA expenditures over \$100,000 had caused the agency to move more slowly.

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"Those claims are absolutely false," Noem said. "Within just an hour or two after the flooding, we had resources from the Department of Homeland Security there."

President [Donald Trump](#) suggested after taking office in January that his administration [would abolish](#) FEMA, formally called the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The Republican president said the agency had bungled past disasters and that federal aid could go directly to states.

But in the midst of U.S. hurricane season and the aftermath of the Texas floods, Trump and his top officials have [taken a softer tone](#), indicating the agency could be rebranded.

"I think he wants it to be remade," Noem said on Sunday.

Flash floods swept through parts of Texas Hill Country on July 4, [killing at least 120 people](#) and leaving another 160 still missing. The disaster put a renewed focus on Trump administration moves to deemphasize FEMA.

As of mid-May, the agency had [lost 2,000 full-time employees](#) - a third of its staff - due to terminations and buyouts.

Noem issued a memo on June 11 that called for U.S. Department of Homeland Security agencies, including FEMA, to submit for her review any contract for more than \$100,000.


The memo, reviewed by Reuters, said agencies should allow at least five days for her office to review the funding requests.

Reuters spoke with several current and former FEMA officials who worried the spending cap could slow down the agency's response to disasters.

The deployment of national search and rescue teams managed by FEMA did not appear in the agency's daily briefing until July 8 and four current and former officials said the spending cap had slowed it down.

Following the Texas floods, one former FEMA official said Noem needed to approve resources that previously would have been deployed more quickly, including law enforcement officers used for security and crews with saws to clear debris from roads.

"FEMA's never been quick," the former official said. "This is slowing down the speed which they had before."

Noem on Sunday denied [a New York Times report](#)  that thousands of calls to FEMA from victims of the Texas floods went unanswered because Noem had not renewed the contracts.

"Those contracts were in place, no employees were off of work," Noem said. "Every one of them was answering calls."

An internal FEMA briefing document reviewed by Reuters said Noem had approved contracts for call center support as of July 10, but did not provide further details.

New flash flood warnings were in place on Sunday across central Texas, including in Texas Hill Country, a FEMA bulletin said.

U.S. Representative Tony Gonzales, a Republican whose district included flood-hit areas, warned on CNN's 'State of the Union' that the region could face a lengthy recovery.

"We're not out of the woods yet," he said.

Reporting by Ted Hesson; Additional reporting by Leah Douglas; Editing by Scott Malone and Deepa Babington

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FEMA's Texas-sized test

July 14, 2025



Analysis by [Matthew Choi](#), [Dan Merica](#) and [Patrick Svitek](#)

Good morning, Early Birds. Bonne fête nationale à tous les Français qui nous suivent. Send tips to earlytips@washpost.com. Thanks for waking up with us.

In today's edition ... The Senate takes up DOGE cuts ... MAGA is split over Epstein ... but first ...

FEMA's Texas-sized test

Weeks before flash floods devastated the Texas Hill Country, Gov. **Greg Abbott** (R) participated in the first meeting of a new council to overhaul the Federal Emergency Management Agency. He criticized FEMA as “slow and clunky,” arguing that states are able to respond “more nimbly, more swiftly, more effectively” to disasters.

But since the July 4 floods that killed dozens in his state, the Texas governor has spoken much more positively about federal disaster response.

“This is the fastest that I’m aware of any administration responding so swiftly, so collaboratively, so coordinated,” Abbott said, appearing alongside Trump during his visit to Texas last week. In a statement, an Abbott spokesperson cited FEMA as an “exceptional” partner.

Abbott’s shifting rhetoric reflects thinking at the White House, where talk of abolishing the agency has been replaced by talk of “rebranding.” His opinions will become even more important in the months ahead: Abbott is one of two sitting governors on the FEMA Review Council, giving him direct influence over how the administration will implement President **Donald Trump**’s so far vague ideas about limiting Washington’s role in disaster coordination and handing more responsibility to the state.

The administration is pointing to Abbott’s response to the flooding as an example of how FEMA can work most effectively, essentially by offloading more of its responsibilities to the states. But FEMA has always deferred to the states to lead disaster management, putting in question just how drastically the administration wants to alter its role.

The debate over FEMA comes as Texans are relying heavily on the agency, which coordinates the immediate federal response to disaster and supports state and local governments in what can be years-long recovery efforts. Since January 2015, FEMA has supported Texas in 16 federally declared disasters, and the state has received nearly \$15 billion in federal disaster funds.

“This is incredibly high stakes for governors and state legislatures,” said **Sarah Labowitz**, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace who studies disaster response. “I think the hard part is that we don’t know [what exactly will happen to FEMA]. It’s sort of a bumper-sticker slogan to say get rid of FEMA as we know it. What does that actually mean to people who are living through disasters?”

Read more from our story with **Patrick Svitek** and **Brianna Sacks** on Abbott's role as the administration plans an overhaul to the agency.

Our colleagues have chronicled some of the extraordinary loss and incredible heroism from the floods, including a camp counselor who helped 16 girls to safety through raging floodwaters and the dozens of children who died in the floods. Read more of their coverage here.

Houston Chronicle

Politics//Texas Politics

FEMA's quick Texas response was 'the exception' as backlog grows under Trump

By **James Osborne**, *Washington Bureau*

July 17, 2025

Two days after [torrential rains set off fatal flash flooding](#) in the Texas Hill Country, President Donald Trump authorized staff at the Federal Emergency Management Agency to travel to the flood zone to help state and local officials begin the rebuilding process.

[But that quick response](#), following widespread media coverage of a disaster that claimed at least 134 lives and left 100 people missing, marked a sharp shift in approach since Trump took office in January, experts say.

As natural disasters like flooding, tornadoes and landslides piled up across the country this spring, FEMA accumulated a backlog of disaster requests that is still lingering as the Gulf of Mexico's hurricane season gets underway.

Currently, five states including Indiana, Oregon and Maryland are [awaiting a federal response more than a month](#) after they requested a federal disaster declaration to unlock funds and other critical resources.

"You're waiting weeks, sometimes months to have your disasters declared," said Sarah Labowitz, a senior fellow at the non-profit Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "Texas is the exception, not the rule."

FEMA, which is overseen by Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, declined to comment for this story. But the Trump administration has repeatedly questioned FEMA's necessity in managing emergency response to natural disasters, at one point saying they were going to eliminate the agency before taking a softer tone following the Texas floods this month.

"We want FEMA to work well," Russell Vought, director of the Office of Management and Budget, told reporters earlier this month. "And, you know, the president is going to continue to be asking tough questions from all of his agencies."

Disaster declarations are necessary to allow the release of federal disaster funds that do everything from giving survivors money to buy food and other necessities and begin large-scale debris removal.

In the two weeks leading up to hurricane season, which began on June 1, FEMA had an average of almost 13 disaster requests pending each day, compared to an average of four during that same period over the previous nine years, according to analysis of federal data by Carnegie.

The backlog comes amid mass firings and departures that have resulted in a 20% decrease in FEMA staff, [according to an op-ed by MaryAnn Tierney](#), the former Region 3 administrator for FEMA.

"Thousands of temporary employees remain on the job, but their contracts are running out. These are people trained to work with disaster survivors. FEMA cannot replace them or bring in new talent because of hiring restrictions," she wrote.

Tierney, along with Region 6 Administrator Tony Robinson who covered Texas and four other states, were among a wave of senior FEMA officials who left the agency in recent months, amid what critics have characterized [as a "brain drain" at the agency](#).

That has left some wondering how FEMA will manage once hurricane season gets into full swing later this summer.

"When you lose that expertise it means you don't have the knowledge about what's possible and how to cut through the red tape," said Caitlin Durkovich, the former deputy homeland security advisor for resilience and response during the Biden administration. "These are people experiencing the worst day of their lives. They have nothing left. They're lucky if they have a phone. And when you delay approval it's delaying money going to people when they need it most."

In Missouri, officials waited more than a month for FEMA assistance after a tornado struck St. Louis in May, killing five people. In West Virginia, which is still waiting for a response from its June 20 request for FEMA assistance, [torrential rains caused rivers](#) to overflow their banks, flooding dozens of homes and businesses and killing nine people.

Even when FEMA officials are on the ground, they no longer have the freedom to order up cleanup crews and debris removal contractors as they once did. Under new Trump administration rules, they must get clearance from Noem to move ahead on all contracts over \$100,000.

An investigation by The New York Times revealed that on July 6 and July 7, as the Guadalupe River swamped residents' homes and children's camps, thousands of calls to FEMA call centers went unanswered after hundreds of contractors were laid off when their contracts expired July 5. Noem denied the policy had resulted in delays, [saying on NBC's Meet the Press](#) that Homeland Security had resources in Texas "just an hour or two after the flooding."

Within the agency, employees have grown weary of taking action that might attract the attention of the administration, said Rafael Lemaitre, a former FEMA spokesman during the Obama administration. He said former colleagues had described a "crisis of fear and paralysis at the agency."

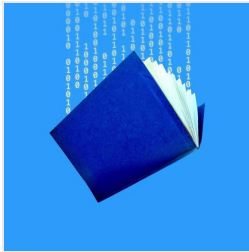
"You can understand how that culture of fear has stopped employees from making the decisions they're supposed to make," he said. "You'd rather stay quiet and err on the side of inaction."

[**James Osborne**](#)

Washington Correspondent

James Osborne is a Washington correspondent for the Houston Chronicle.

James covers politics and federal policy impacting Texas from the Houston Chronicle's bureau in Washington, D.C. He's been with the Chronicle since 2016.



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Jul 22, 2025 - Politics & Policy

FEMA search and rescue chief exits agency after Texas flood response



Josephine Walker



Search and rescue crews work to search a vehicle and nearby debris along the Guadalupe River in Kerville, Monday, July 7, 2025. Photo: Jason Fochtman/Houston Chronicle via Getty Images.

The chief of the Federal Emergency Management Agency urban search and rescue team resigned Monday over frustrations on how the government handled the [Texas flood](#) response, [CNN](#) first reported.

The big picture: Ken Pagurek's resignation comes as the agency approaches peak disaster season, while fighting off accusations of a [delayed disaster response](#) in Texas as President Trump pushes to overhaul FEMA.

- Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem implemented a rule in June that requires every funding request over \$100,000 have her personal sign-off before funds can be dispersed, which [reportedly complicated](#) the Texas response.
- Pagurek told colleagues that the [bureaucratic](#) red tape that delayed the response was what pushed him to resign, according to CNN.
- "This decision was not made lightly, and after much reflection and prayer, it is the right path for me at this time," Pagurek wrote in a resignation letter that didn't mention the flood response.

What they're saying: "It is laughable that a career public employee, who claims to serve the American people, would choose to resign over our refusal to hastily approve a six-figure deployment contract without basic financial oversight," a Department of Homeland Security spokesperson told Axios in response to a request for comment.

- "We're being responsible with taxpayer dollars, that's our job," the spokesperson continued in the statement. "Attempting to spin a personal career decision into some big scandal is ridiculous."
- The DHS spokesperson also said "FEMA experienced no delays in deployment of assets" and that Texas officials have "applauded" the government's response.

Catch up quick: The July 4 flooding killed at least 135 people in central Texas, and three people are [still missing](#) as the search continues on its third week.

Zoom out: Trump has [repeatedly floated](#) the idea of dismantling FEMA, and has [suggested](#) that his administration may try to bring disaster response "down to the state level."

- Trump signed an [executive order](#) in January that created a task force geared toward reviewing FEMA's protocols and will recommend changes to the agency.
- Congress has the [sole authority](#) to officially eliminate FEMA.

Go deeper: [Trump administration sued by 20 states over FEMA disaster program cuts](#)



Go deeper



Megan Stringer
Jul 10, 2025 - [Axios San Antonio](#)

FEMA waited 3 days to send rescue crews to Texas: report



A search and recovery team in Comfort, Texas. Photo: Jim Vondruska/Getty Images

The Federal Emergency Management Agency did not deploy search and rescue teams to the [Texas Hill Country](#) until Monday, more than 72 hours after the [deadly floods](#), [per CNN](#).

The big picture: The [July Fourth flooding](#), which left at least [120 people](#) dead, offers a first look into how FEMA could handle catastrophes as President Trump has pushed to dismantle the agency and put emergency response in the hands of states.

[Go deeper \(2 min. read\)](#) →



Megan Stringer

Jul 11, 2025 - [Axios San Antonio](#)

Trump defends federal flood response in Texas visit



President Trump and first lady Melania Trump arrived at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio before heading to Kerrville on Friday. Photo: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

President Trump defended his administration's response to the [Texas Hill Country](#) flooding after surveying the [damage](#) and meeting with victims' families on Friday in Kerrville.

The big picture: The president's visit comes amid questions about the federal response to the flooding, as he has pushed to dismantle the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#).

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Asher Price
Jul 8, 2025 - [Axios Austin](#)

Texas politicians praise Trump's response to deadly floods

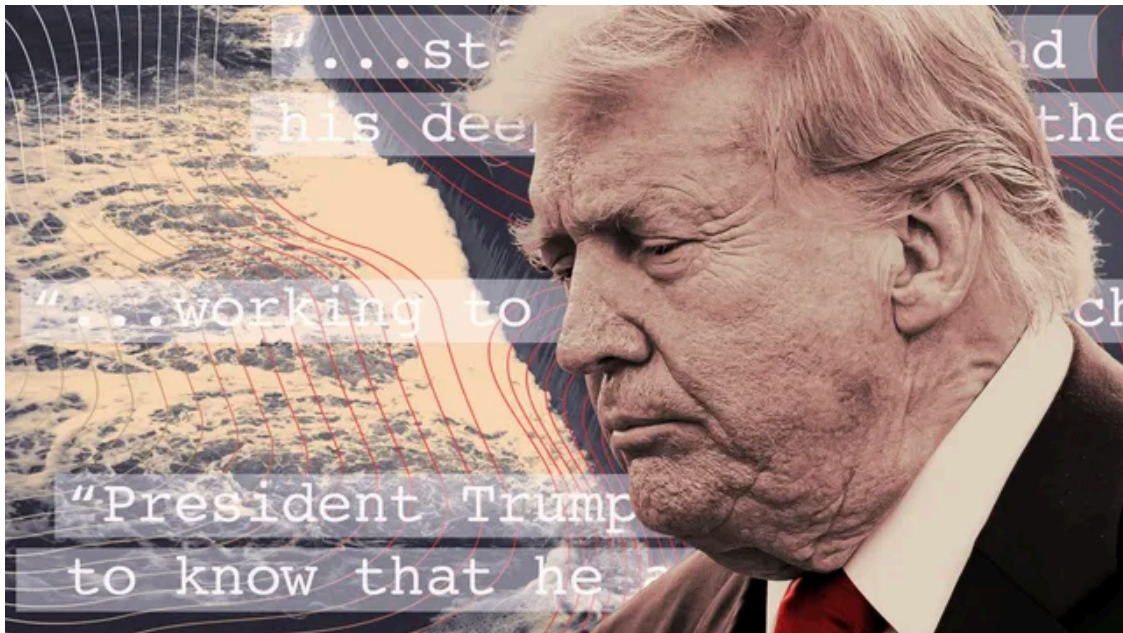


Photo illustration: Sarah Grillo/Axios; Photos: Patrick van Katwijk and Reginald Mathalone/NurPhoto via Getty Images

In the [deadliest natural disaster](#) since the Trump administration's layoffs and buyouts at federal forecasting offices, Texas officials are praising the president and deflecting questions about the possible effect of the cuts.

Why it matters: Questions about why the scores of people killed in the July Fourth floods were not [adequately warned](#) about the fast-rising Guadalupe River remain unanswered as authorities focus their efforts on finding missing people, including five girls from [Camp Mystic](#).

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Head of FEMA Search and Rescue resigns over agency's response to Texas floods: Sources

Ken Pagurek told colleagues he was frustrated by new hurdles, sources said.

By [Will Steakin](#)

July 23, 2025, 11:52 AM



Number of missing Texas flood victims revised The number of people missing from the catastrophic flooding in Kerr County, Texas, has been revised from nearly 100 to three. At least 135 people died in the historic floods.

The head of [FEMA's](#) Urban Search and Rescue branch, Ken Pagurek, resigned on Monday, multiple sources confirmed to ABC News.

Pagurek told colleagues he was frustrated by the Department of Homeland Security's efforts to dismantle FEMA and by new hurdles that slowed the agency's response to the [catastrophic flooding](#) in Central Texas earlier this month, according to sources familiar with the matter.

Sources said he pointed to a new DHS policy requiring all spending over \$100,000 to be personally approved by Secretary Kristi Noem as a key factor behind the delays and, ultimately, his decision to step down.

MORE: Number of missing in Texas floods drops from nearly 100 to 3 in hard-hit county→

The news was first reported by [CNN](#).

Pagurek had worked with FEMA's search and rescue operations for more than a decade and had served as its chief for the past year. He was previously a Philadelphia firefighter and the head of FEMA's Pennsylvania Task Force 1 search and rescue operation, and has responded to disasters including the [Maui wildfires](#) and the [Surfside building collapse](#).

Pagurek did not respond to a request for comment by ABC News.



A damaged home is seen near Camp Mystic, the site of where at least 20 girls went missing after flash flooding in Hunt, Texas, on July 5, 2025.

Ronaldo Schemidt/AFP via Getty Images

DHS spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin told ABC News, "The attempt to spin a personal career decision into some big scandal is RIDICULOUS. It is laughable that a career public employee,

who claims to serve the American people, would choose to resign over our refusal to hastily approve a six-figure deployment contract without basic financial oversight."

"We're being responsible with taxpayer dollars, that's our job," McLaughlin said. "FEMA experienced no delays in deployment of assets, and Texas officials have unequivocally and vocally applauded the federal government and FEMA's response. If anyone is upset by the end of unchecked, blank-check spending under President Trump's administration, that says more about them than it does about us."

ABC News' Brian Hartman contributed to this report.

U.S. NEWS

FEMA chief rejects criticism, calls Texas floods response ‘a model’ for dealing with disaster

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BY **GABRIELA AOUN ANGUEIRA**

Updated 5:33 PM EDT, July 23, 2025

The acting administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency is pushing back on criticisms of the federal response to the central Texas floods that [killed at least 136 people earlier this month](#).

“I can’t see anything we did wrong,” [David Richardson](#) told a House panel of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure on Wednesday. He called the relationship between state and federal agencies “a model for how disasters should be handled.”

Lawmakers used the hearing about improvements to FEMA disaster response to address reports that FEMA support was impaired by bureaucratic delays that slowed the deployment of urban search and rescue teams and left the agency’s call centers unstaffed, which Richardson denied. The response “brought the maximum amount of capability to bear in Texas at the right time and the right place,” he said.

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resignation Monday of FEMA's urban search and rescue leader. President [Donald Trump](#) and [Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem](#) have touted the robust federal support for Texas despite their [past support for eliminating FEMA](#).

Reports of delays on the ground denied

The acting administrator denied reports that FEMA urban [search-and-rescue](#) teams were delayed over 72 hours because of a new rule imposed by Noem that she must personally approve any contract of \$100,000 or more. Richardson said a Texas-based FEMA task force was on the ground on July 4, along with other Homeland Security assets like the Coast Guard and Customs and Border Protection, and that additional support came within "24 hours" of being requested.

Rep. Greg Stanton, D-Ariz., pushed back on FEMA's readiness, asking why more of the 28 FEMA urban search-and-rescue teams located around the country were not on standby ahead of receiving a request from the state of Texas. "It haunts me that we could have had more urban search and rescue pre-positioned in place," said Stanton. "That was a choice."

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The leader of FEMA's urban search-and-rescue effort, Ken Pagurek, expressed frustration with the delays to colleagues before resigning Monday, according to CNN. In response to Pagurek's resignation, a DHS spokesperson told The Associated Press, "It is laughable that a career public employee, who claims to serve the American people, would choose to resign over our refusal to hastily approve a six-figure deployment contract without basic financial oversight."

The Texas Division of Emergency Management did not respond to a request for comment on whether search-and-rescue efforts were impacted by delayed deployment of the FEMA teams.

Richardson also denied a report from The New York Times that 84% of calls to FEMA went unanswered on July 7, three days after the July 4 floods, because Noem let lapse contract renewals with outside call centers. The contracts were renewed July 10, according to The Times.

"The vast majority of phone calls were answered. There was never a lapse in the contract," said Richardson, echoing Noem's statements that the report was "fake news."

Richardson defended his absence from the ground efforts in Texas, saying he worked from Washington, D.C., "to kick down the doors of bureaucracy" and denying suggestions that Trump or Noem told him to stand down. He did not visit Texas until July 12.

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FEMA's fate is still in question

Since the Texas floods, Trump has deflected questions about FEMA's fate. In June, he said he wanted to begin "phasing out" FEMA after the hurricane season "to wean off of FEMA and bring it to the state level."

Trump has been criticized for [delaying decisions on disaster declaration requests](#), causing some states to wait as long as two months for approval to receive assistance to repair public infrastructure or help survivors.

Lawmakers pressed Richardson on more general issues of FEMA reform as well, including concerns over long overdue preparedness grant funding, flood insurance and rules about how much financial assistance survivors can receive.

Both Democratic and Republican lawmakers asked about the fate of the [Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities](#) program, which Trump canceled earlier this year. The grants supplied hundreds of millions of dollars in disaster mitigation funding. [Twenty states are now suing the administration](#) over the loss of funds.

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On Tuesday, Trump approved disaster declaration requests for Michigan, Oregon, Indiana, Kansas, West Virginia, Missouri and New Mexico and expanded assistance in Kentucky.

Rep. Bob Onder, R-Mo., asked Richardson why it took a month for his state to get a disaster declaration. "My constituents were frustrated by how long it takes to get temporary housing and debris removal assistance," Onder said. Richardson referred back to Texas' declaration request: "We turned that around within just a couple hours."

A Trump-appointed FEMA review council is in the process of crafting recommendations to the president on changes to the agency. Noem, who co-chairs the council, told its members five days after the Texas floods that FEMA "needs to be eliminated as it exists today and remade as a responsive agency."

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Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Wash., said he and Rep. Sam Graves, R-Mo., would introduce the bipartisan Fixing Emergency Management for Americans Act this week, which would make FEMA an independent, Cabinet-level agency, incentivize states to prioritize resilience and improve aid for survivors. “We don’t need to wait for a FEMA review council,” said Larsen. “We’ve been reviewing FEMA for a long time.”

 **GABRIELA AOUN ANGUIERA**
Gabriela covers philanthropy’s role in disaster resilience and recovery. She is based in San Diego, California.
 

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MOST READ

Trump administration

Fema director defends Texas flood response as 'model' for disasters

David Richardson's comments follow claims of federal agency's 'incompetence' and inaction during fatal floods



📷 David Richardson, the acting Fema director, testifies during a House hearing in Washington DC on Wednesday. Photograph: Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA

Dharna Noor

Wed 23 Jul 2025 12.36 EDT

David Richardson, the acting director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (Fema), on Wednesday defended his agency's handling of **recent deadly floods** in **Texas**, claiming the response was a “model” for “how disasters should be handled”.

The comment came as Richardson faced accusations that the response to the floods was botched, characterized by ignorance and carelessness.

“This wasn’t just incompetence. It wasn’t just indifference. It was both,” Greg Stanton, a Democratic representative from Arizona, told Richardson at the House transportation and infrastructure committee hearing. “And that deadly combination likely cost lives.”

The hearing followed a **slew of reports** saying Richardson was nowhere to be found during the flood. Earlier, the acting director, who has no previous experience in disaster management, reportedly said he was unaware that **hurricane season exists** in the US - something the White House later **said** was a “joke”.

Richardson denied any agency wrongdoing in the **Texas** floods. “What happened in Texas was an absolute tragedy,” he said.

He and other officials under **Donald Trump** were aiming to restore the agency to its original goals, he said, encouraging states to take on more financial and logistical responsibility for disasters.

“Fema has lost sight of its original intent,” he said. “Under the leadership of the President and the Secretary we are returning to this mission focus moving forward.”

Anticipating this argument, Rick Larsen, a US representative and ranking member of the House committee, came to the hearing armed with the

Congressional Research Service's list of the 518 actions that Fema is mandated to follow.

"Currently, Fema doesn't follow all these laws," he said.

In response, Richardson said the agency had done its "own mission analysis".

"What we did, and I can commit to, is that we developed eight mission-essential tasks that we have to do by statute," he said.

At the hearing, Larsen also announced a bipartisan bill to reform the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which he is co-leading with Sam Graves, the House transportation and infrastructure chair and a Republican from Missouri, that proposes centralizing disaster assistance funding information.

"As disasters become more frequent and severe, leaving more lives, homes and livelihoods at risk, maintaining Fema's core functions remains critically important," said Will McDow, an associate vice-president at the Environmental Defense Fund, which is backing the bill.

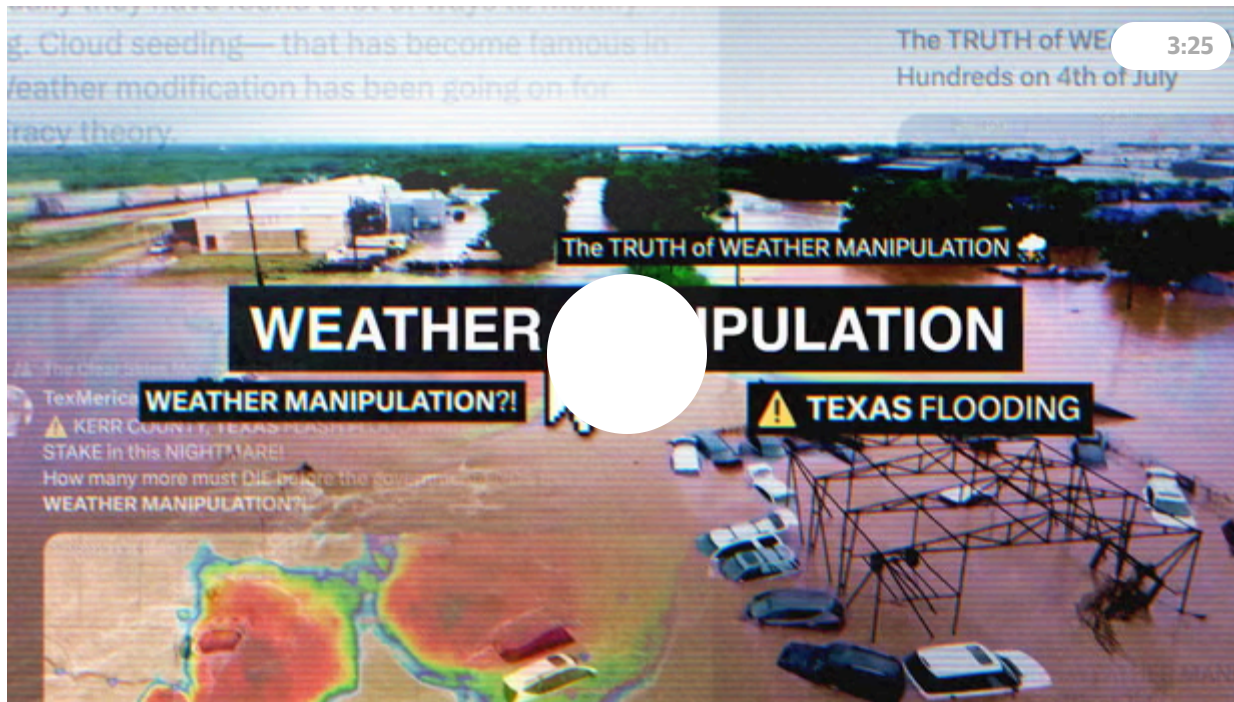
During his first week in office, Trump floated the idea of getting rid of Fema altogether, something the homeland security secretary, Kristi Noem, repeated in March.

John Raymond Garamendi, a Democratic representative from California, asked Richardson if he can "commit to us today that Fema will exist in the future, will be able to carry out its functions under the law and under the needs of this nation".

Richardson provided a vague response. "The president wants better emergency management for the American people, and that's a noble goal," he said.

In the days after the recent floods ravaged central Texas, reports showed that Fema did not answer nearly two-thirds of calls to its disaster assistance

hotline, something Noem dismissed as “fake news”.



Debunked: the far-right conspiracy theories fuelled by Texas floods – video explainer

Richardson also denied the reporting. “The vast majority of phone calls were answered, the questions were addressed,” he said.

He said a key goal for Fema under his leadership is “cutting through red tape and ensuring that when federal assistance is warranted we deliver assistance to survivors rapidly”. But Noem in recent weeks has enacted a new rule requiring any department contract or grant over \$100,000 to be personally signed off by her before funds can be allocated, anonymous Fema officials told NBC News.

“To me, having someone, one person only, having to sign off on every contract of \$100,000 or more is the definition of bureaucracy,” said Dina Titus, a Democratic representative from Nevada.

This week, Ken Pagurek, Fema's urban search and rescue branch head, resigned, CNN first **reported**, after more than a decade at the agency, reportedly citing concerns about **major cuts** Trump has made to the agency and the **result on disaster management**.

Study after study shows that flooding like this summer's in Texas is becoming **more severe and more common** amid the climate crisis. Eleanor Holmes Norton, a Democratic delegate from Washington DC, asked Richardson if he believes fossil fuels are the primary cause of the climate crisis, and if he thinks extreme weather is increasing.

Richardson was noncommittal in his answer. "What I believe is that we will address disasters regardless of their origin," he said.

Asked if he thought the agency had made any mistakes during the floods, Richardson said: "I can't see anything that we did wrong.

"Nothing is perfect. However, I will say that it was a model, particularly at Fema, the region and the state level," he said. "It was a model how disasters should be handled."

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NEWS

'It's a graveyard': Kerr County residents share stories of survival, recovery at flood hearing

Dozens of Kerr County residents testified at a public hearing on Thursday about the July 4 flash floods that killed more than 130 people in Texas.



Alicia Jeffrey Baker, right, gives a public testimony to Texas lawmakers during a joint hearing at the Hill Country Youth Event Center in Kerrville, Thursday, July 31, 2025. Baker lost her daughter Madelyn "Emmy" Jeffrey and parents Emlyn and Penelope Jeffrey in the deadly July 4 floods that struck the Hill Country, resulting in the deaths of over 130 people.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

By **Melissa Manno**, Staff Writer

Aug 1, 2025



The days after the devastating Kerr County flood felt like the longest of Alicia Jeffrey Baker's life.

On July 4, Baker's 11-year-old daughter, Madelyn "Emmy" Jeffrey, and her parents, Emlyn and Penelope Jeffrey, were sleeping in the family's cabin along the Guadalupe River when they were swept away by the floodwater.

Her parents were discovered on Saturday, but not identified until Sunday. By then, their bodies had already been sent to Bexar County for autopsies, which Baker said she and her siblings wouldn't have authorized.

It wasn't until Thursday, July 10, that Baker received the news about Emmy. Breaking down in tears, she told lawmakers on Thursday that her daughter's body could only be identified by her charm bracelet.

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"The river that we've loved so much killed them," the San Antonio resident said.



Alicia Jeffrey Baker, left, is embraced by a community member after giving public testimony to Texas lawmakers during a joint hearing at the Hill Country Youth Event Center in Kerrville, Thursday, July 31, 2025. Baker lost her daughter Madelyn "Emmy" Jeffrey and parents Emlyn and Penelope Jeffrey in the deadly July 4 floods that struck the Hill Country, resulting in the deaths of over 130 people.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

Baker was among dozens of community members who testified at a public hearing on Thursday about the July 4 flash floods that killed more than 130 people in Texas, including at least 37 children. During the over 13-hour

meeting, residents shared harrowing accounts of survival, mourned the lost lives and detailed their work to restore their neighborhoods and communities.

They also urged lawmakers to focus on flood relief during the 30-day special session called by Gov. Greg Abbott by approving funding for a stronger warning system, improving emergency management protocols, and fixing cell phone dead zones that hampered rescue efforts.

In the immediate aftermath of the flood, Baker said she was the first parent to show up at Ingram Elementary School, which had been designated as a reunification center. She arrived desperate for help but was met with confusion and chaos.

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“They didn’t even know they were the spot,” said Baker, a pre-K teacher at North East Independent School District. “They had no way of communicating and no one was in charge. I waited there for over 12 hours for news — and no one could tell you anything at all.”

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A siren system equipped with gauges to signal when water reaches dangerous levels could have saved lives, she said.

“When we know better, we do better,” she said. “We need to do better for the people in this community, for the people who are suffering.”





Left, Sen. Charles Perry, R-Lubbock, listens to testimony from Central Texas officials during a joint hearing at the Hill Country Youth Event Center in Kerrville, Thursday, July 31, 2025. Texas lawmakers held a joint hearing on Disaster Preparedness and Flooding at the Hill Country Youth Event Center. They listened to public comments in response to the deadly July 4 floods that struck the Hill Country, resulting in the deaths of over 130 people.

Part of this community

In the 10 minutes it took Nancy Zdunkewicz and her parents to pack a bag and step outside, floodwaters had already encircled their vacation home, perched 40 feet above the river in the village of Hunt.

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The family raced to their cars and drove onto Highway 39, but Zdunkewicz said there was nowhere to go. All the routes to higher ground had been swallowed by the river. So she and her parents, both seniors, climbed onto their cars and into two cedar trees on either side of the roadway.

When they looked back down at the road, their cars were gone.

“We ended up staying in the trees for several hours,” Zdunkewicz said through tears. “We watched other cars shoot down the river — and massive trees — and we just prayed and planned for what we would do if our tree was the next one to fall.”

Zdunkewicz and her parents survived the night, but they lost several neighbors and friends in the flood. On Thursday, she and her father shared their story with state lawmakers.

“Nancy is not only my daughter. She is my hero,” Richard Zdunkewicz said.

The Zdunkewicz family has owned property on the South Fork of the Guadalupe River for nearly a century. Both Nancy and her mother attended Camp Mystic, where 27 campers and counselors were swept away to their deaths.

Nancy told lawmakers that recovery efforts must focus primarily on Hunt, which was the epicenter of the deadly flooding. She and her father said there needs to be more evacuation routes for riverside property owners, signs and alerts to warn out-of-town visitors about the severity of flooding, a strong and reliable siren system, and better cell phone signal in the rural community.

Nancy said permanent residents need to be taken care of first. They need temporary housing, mental health resources and financial support to rebuild their homes, businesses and lives. She also urged the state not to forget families like hers whose homes have been stripped to the studs, noting that nearly all the riverfront houses along the South Fork are generational family vacation properties.

“We pay property taxes. We are part of this economy, and we are part of this community,” she said. “These homes suffered the most damage, and families like mine don’t know how we’ll ever be able to afford to rebuild because we’re not eligible for FEMA, because many don’t have insurance.”

“It’s a real question whether or not Hunt comes back if these homes don’t come back.”



Richard Zdunkewicz, right, embraces his daughter Nancy Zdunkewicz after giving public testimony to state lawmakers during a joint hearing at the Hill Country Youth Event Center in Kerrville, Thursday, July 31, 2025. They clung to a tree outside of their Hunt property for two hours until the flood water receded and they could safely make their way across the flooded roadway.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

Kerrville resident Bud Bolton recalled the haunting scene he witnessed at the Blue Oak RV Park in the early morning hours of July 4. He said a neighbor woke him up around 4 a.m. after trying to save the Burgess family, all four of whom were swept away and killed in the floodwater.

Opening the door to their RV, he and his wife saw that the water was coming up the steps. He said he saw about 20 fire trucks, police cars and rescue workers in the parking lot, but nobody knocked on his door and told him to evacuate.

Bolton said he knew 27 people who died in the flood from his or nearby RV parks. He added that he only received an evacuation alert on his phone after his RV — and everything around it — had already been carried away by the water.

“I watched 108 RVs float right by me from three RV parks,” he recalled. “Watching all these screaming kids inside these RVs with the lights still powered on from the batteries after they pulled loose, and then screaming and hearing crashes and crashes, and tiny homes crashing and more crashing, then dead silence and more crashes and more screams.”



Texas Sen. Adam Hinojosa, R-Corpus Christi, addresses people giving public testimony during a joint hearing at the Hill Country Youth Event Center in Kerrville, Thursday, July 31, 2025. State lawmakers hosted the hearing in response to the deadly July 4 floods that struck the Hill Country, resulting in the deaths of over 130 people.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

'They're finding fingers'

Ann Carr testified that she and her neighbors who live on Ingram Lake have noticed something concerning since the July 4 flood.

"Our lake has become a toxic pit," she said. "We've talked to divers who have been out there. We have asked them direct questions. 'Are there bodies in the water?' Their answers are yes."

Carr said her community was relieved to hear that the body of water would be drained along with Nimitz Lake in Kerrville to search for flood victims. A week later, she said she found out that Kerr County officials had decided against it due to the cost.

There are still body parts in the water, she said.

"They're finding fingers, they're finding wallets, they're finding limbs, and then they're saying that the bodies are recovered, and they're not," she said. "We have six feet of rubble that has invaded our lake, and it's become a graveyard."

Carr urged lawmakers to dip into the state's budget surplus to fund the drainage project. She said the lake is the heart of Ingram, and that the people who visit to boat and fish spend money in the community.

Every day, she said she looks outside and sees an oil slick bubbling in front of her property because there's a vehicle deep in the water. If the state won't clean up the lake, she asked that state officials at least help pay for it.

"We're willing to get our hands dirty, but we need y'all's help," she said.



Auburne Gallagher of Sandy Creek cries as she gives public testimony to Texas lawmakers during a joint hearing at the Hill Country Youth Event Center in Kerrville, Thursday, July 31, 2025. State lawmakers hosted the hearing in response to the deadly July 4 floods that struck the Hill Country, resulting in the deaths of over 130 people.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

Mike Richards expressed similar frustrations to the legislators. He said his daughter, who lives on his land in Center Point, called him the day after the flood to say she had found a corpse near the house.

When he arrived, he said he and a group of volunteers found 10 bodies, including a man who appeared to have survived the flood but bled to death while awaiting help.

"I just wish I'd had the opportunity to find him," Richards said.

Richards slammed FEMA, Kerr County, and state officials for turning volunteers away who were willing to help with victim recovery. He said a volunteer group was going to bring him excavators to help clear a 100-foot-long towering pile of debris on his land, but officials said no.

He said he and other volunteers just stopped searching on Saturday.

“I think the state involvement is pathetic,” he said.



Texas Sen. Donna Campbell, from left, R-New Braunfels, talks with Travis County residents Auburne Gallagher and Ashlee Willis after hearing their public testimonies during a joint hearing at the Hill Country Youth Event Center in Kerrville, Thursday, July 31, 2025. State lawmakers hosted the hearing in response to the deadly July 4 floods that struck the Hill Country, resulting in the deaths of over 130 people.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News
Aug 1, 2025



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Texas lawmakers could break Guadalupe's chain of sorrow

The policies that state and local officials adopt will be judged as either robust or insufficient, prescient or shortsighted, lifesaving or life-failing.

A makeshift memorial to flood victims stands on the banks of the Guadalupe River in Kerrville. How state lawmakers respond to the deadly flooding will be a measure of how they honor these victims.

Eric Gay/Associated Press

By **American-Statesman Editorial Board, Express-News Editorial Board**

Aug 7, 2025



It will happen again.

The rain will thrash the Texas Hill Country, and the Guadalupe River will rise with breathtaking speed, run with fury and leave destruction in its wake.

In a future always closer than we imagine, another great flood will rip through the Hill Country, and in the aftermath of that disaster, people will look back at this time for context and understanding.

They will look in judgment for what was done — or not done — to prepare.

With the illumination of hindsight, they will peer into the dark early morning hours of July 4, 2025, and clearly see the many failures in

governance that contributed to the deaths of at least 136 people, including 108 in Kerr County.

They will invoke [Camp Mystic](#), where 25 girls, two counselors and one of the owners were fatally swept away on the bank of the Guadalupe's south fork, and they will reawaken sharp questions about why the Federal Emergency Management Agency repeatedly granted the camp's appeals to have buildings exempted from its 100-year flood map.

They will revive familiar points about how local officials refused to invest in a modern alert system and how that contributed to confusion, just as they will question an unwillingness by Texas officials to acknowledge climate change, even as it makes extreme weather stronger and more likely.

They will raise questions about rebuilding in known flood zones. They will study the slow and bureaucratic federal disaster response, and they will revive the stories of how people, weeks after this deadly flood, were still discovering body parts.

We cannot prevent natural disasters, but we can prepare for them. And when the next massive flood strikes the Hill Country, the failure to prepare for the July 4, 2025, flood will again be cast in a sharp light.



Damage is seen at an RV park along the Guadalupe River just outside Kerrville. In addition to infrastructure, lawmakers need to fund a public awareness campaign and look critically at development in flood zones.

Jason Fochtman/Houston Chronicle

But that's not all. The response to this catastrophe also will be scrutinized. The policies that state and local officials adopt will be judged as either robust or insufficient, prescient or shortsighted, lifesaving or life-failing.

For the past five weeks, the Austin American-Statesman and San Antonio Express-News editorial boards [have collaborated on a series of editorials in response to the July 4 Hill Country flooding](#) because we believe the best way to honor those swept away is to demand accountability for lax policies that contributed to this tragedy and to

call for meaningful change to ensure future safety. We believe that combining our voices is a statement about the urgent need for change.

As we wrote in our [first editorial](#), which remembered those who paid for the region's failures with their lives: "Now that debt demands the attention of state and local officials — not because they could ever replace what's been lost, but because the imperative for action is clear, given the terrible cost of inaction."

To study the record of flooding in Central and South Texas — a region our two news organizations share — is to bear witness to the repetition of history.

Guadalupe River Basin flood events by year

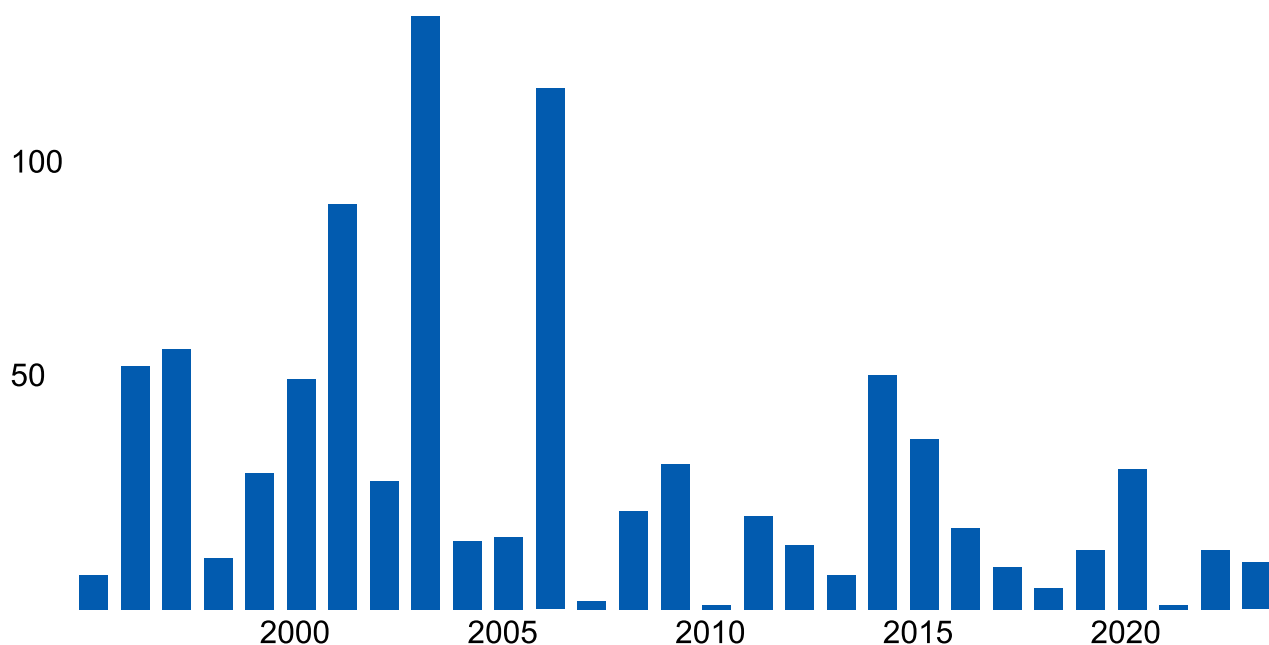


Chart: Alexandra Kanik Source: [NOAA](#)

In the aftermath of this summer's flooding there were many comparisons to the July 1987 flash flood on the Guadalupe River that

killed 10 teenagers fleeing the Pot O' Gold Christian Camp near Comfort.

A National Weather Service report about the 1987 flood details how as the Guadalupe rose at Camp Mystic, "Remarks by old timers note the flooding taking place reminds them of the 1978 Hill Country Flood."

That flood killed 25 people in the Hill Country, destroyed hundreds of homes and led to the evacuation of summer camps. Floods in 1932 and 1921 are also frequent reference points.

Our challenge to state lawmakers and local officials is to enact policies and make investments that break this chain of sorrow.

Unwilling to invest

The first and easiest place to begin is with the installation of an alert system throughout the Hill Country.

A region known as Flash Flood Alley should have a robust network of river gauges and sirens to alert people of impending flooding. That no such network exists in Kerr County, in the heart of the Hill Country and the center of the July 4 devastation, is a haunting lesson in failing to see the value of investing in the safety of people.

The opportunity was there in March 2016 during a Kerr County Commissioners Court meeting when officials discussed a modern alert system, but then-Commissioner H.A. Baldwin dismissed sirens, saying they would disrupt Kerr's bucolic beauty.



An emergency siren is visible on top of the Comfort Volunteer Fire Department.

Ashley Landis/Associated Press

"The thought of our beautiful Kerr County having these damn sirens going off in the middle of the night, I'm going to have to start drinking again to put up with y'all," he said.

The opportunity was also there in recent years for the Upper Guadalupe River Authority, a small agency that manages this portion of the river, to upgrade its meager flood warning system, which dated back to 1989. But rather than modernize the system, the authority chose to reduce taxes and spend down reserves.

The opportunity was there in 2017 and 2018 when Kerr County applied for federal funding for an alert system, only to have the Texas

Division of Emergency Management, which managed those grants, reject the requests.

And while legislation this year would not have mitigated the flooding of July 4, it's telling that after the Texas House voted 129-18 to pass House Bill 13, which would have created a council to establish emergency response plans and provide grants for emergency communication equipment, the bill languished in the Senate.



Auburne Gallagher of Sandy Creek cries as she testifies on July 31 before Texas lawmakers during a joint hearing at the Hill Country Youth Event Center in Kerrville. Lawmakers have the opportunity to honor victims and prevent future tragedy with a robust response.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

It shouldn't take a tragedy to see the value of investing in the safety of people.

The girls at Camp Mystic, the counselors, the grandchildren with their grandparents, the parents with their children, the sisters holding hands to their deaths, the long-married couples swept apart by the river — none of these people were martyrs in the name of disaster preparedness. They were normal folks enjoying a holiday weekend with people they loved. They were living on the assumption that local and state officials were prepared for the worst.

More than infrastructure

In a special session dominated by gerrymandering, a reflection of legislative priorities, the joint Senate and House Select Committee on Disaster Preparedness and Flooding convened on July 31 in Kerrville to listen to survivors, and grieving friends and families so their voices can inform the official disaster response.

Alicia Jeffrey Baker, of San Antonio, spoke of losing her 11-year-old daughter, Madelyn “Emmy” Jeffrey, and her parents, Emlyn and Penelope Jeffrey, when the Guadalupe River washed away their cabin.

Her parents were found and identified July 5, and Emmy was found July 10, identified by her charm bracelet. Baker asked lawmakers to consider a siren system equipped with gauges to signal when water reaches dangerous levels.



Alicia Jeffrey Baker, right, testifies on July 31 before Texas lawmakers during a joint hearing at the Hill Country Youth Event Center in Kerrville. Baker lost her daughter Madelyn “Emmy” Jeffrey and parents, Emlyn and Penelope Jeffrey, in the deadly July 4 flooding.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

“When we know better, we do better,” she said. “We need to do better for the people in this community, for the people who are suffering.”

Other families and survivors also made it clear they want lawmakers to focus on funding a strong warning system, better emergency management protocols and fixing dead zones where cellphones can’t be used.

We expect lawmakers to deliver on these investments, as well as fund barriers at low water crossings and a statewide emergency radio system, but these steps alone are not enough.

An alert system must be accompanied with an equally robust public awareness campaign, so Texans know how to respond when sirens and cellphone alerts sound. Texans need to have the risk of flooding in the Hill Country ingrained in their minds. State lawmakers need to guard against the complacency that comes with the passage of time.

They will be judged the next time riverbanks overflow.

The state also needs to create a fund to prevent building in the floodplain; this could be done through conservation

easements to preserve private property rights.

This also requires updating flood maps to accurately reflect risk, which, in turn, requires lawmakers and local officials to acknowledge climate change. How can we have accurate flood maps if we don't account for the interplay between warming weather and the Balcones Escarpment?

If all state lawmakers do is fund an alert system, blast local officials for ineptitude and a lack of preparedness, and fail to address land use and climate concerns, they will be tempting fate and inviting tragedy.

For the public, the shock of a catastrophe fades with the passage of time. Not so for grieving families and communities. We are five weeks removed from the deadly Hill Country flooding, but in some ways, this has it backward. We are five weeks into a disaster that will be felt for generations, and we are also five weeks closer to the next great flood.

When that day comes, how state and local officials honored lives lost and acted to prevent future tragedy will be held to the light either in

praise or judgment.

This editorial is part of the collaboration between the Austin American-Statesman and San Antonio Express-News editorial boards in response to the Central Texas floods.

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Aug 7, 2025

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Heck of a job, Secretary Noem | Editorial

While Houstonians step up to help flood victims, FEMA pinches pennies in its disaster response. Congress needs a bipartisan investigation.

By [The Editorial Board](#), *Opinions from the Houston Chronicle Editorial Board*

July 14, 2025

On Sunday morning, Nikki Howard and Shauna Howard Russell set up a lemonade stand. The sisters — both moms in their mid-40s — wanted to find some way to give back to the local families that had suffered tragic losses in the Hill Country floods, and selling drinks for a dollar per cup seemed like a good option.

“We give back spiritually in prayer and in thought, but we just need something tangible to give, and so that’s what we’re planning on doing,” Nikki said. “We want to reflect what compassion and empathy looks like to our children.”

All across the state, Texans are stepping up to do what we can to help our neighbors in need. As kids splashed in an inflatable pool behind the stand, minivans and SUVs parked along the curb at University Blvd. and College St. in West University Place. Some just dropped off a few bucks — or \$20 — without even asking for a beverage.

Judging by recent reporting on the Hill Country floods, however, some officials in Washington are more focused on saving cash than helping Texans recover.

First, the New York Times reported that the Federal Emergency Management Agency [bizarrely laid](#) off workers at its disaster assistance call center just days after the flood. Impacted families, like those who lost a home to the flood, can receive a one-time payment of up to \$750 to help with their immediate expenses. This money helps cover meals, hotel stays, clothing, and other needs while recovery teams continue to search through and remove flood debris. But due to budget cuts by Kristi Noem, the Secretary of Homeland Security, the call center contract was dropped and thousands of phone calls went unanswered.

Internal emails even show that officials knew they were failing at their task and needed the secretary to extend the call center contracts. “We still do not have a decision, waiver or signature from the DHS Secretary,” one FEMA employee wrote in a July 8 email to colleagues.

Leaving disaster victims on hold isn’t governmental efficiency. It’s heartless. That’s not the only example of federal penny-pinching undermining disaster response.

CNN reported that FEMA waited [72 hours](#) before sending any resources to help support Texas’ disaster response. Why the delay? Self-imposed government red tape. Noem has mandated that she personally review and approve expenses over \$100,000 — including, say, deploying search-

and-rescue teams after a flood that left more than 100 dead. As a result, Noem didn't provide a green light for those critical efforts until the Monday after Friday's flood, long past the moment for immediate action.

Noem claims the reporting is "fake news" and called for anonymous sources to reveal themselves. A Homeland Security spokesperson said that the agency is shifting from a "bloated, DC-centric dead weight" to empowering states.

It's true Texas has done an admirable job bolstering our own disaster response at the Texas Division of Emergency Management, [as we reported after Hurricane Beryl](#), but the state still relies on FEMA for help with aerial imagery, reimbursing local organizations, and other rescue and recovery duties. Without that quick federal support, Texas instead [turned](#) to the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, a mutual aid agreement between states to share resources. You know things are bad in Washington when Gov. Greg Abbott is [publicly thanking](#) California Gov. Gavin Newsom.

Finally, there's the lack of leadership from the acting head of FEMA, David Richardson. As Politico has [reported](#), Trump's FEMA director failed to make any public appearances, statements or social media postings immediately following the deadly flood. (He finally showed up a week later.) This is the sort of urgency Texans can expect from a man who joked that he didn't know there was a [hurricane season](#).

Given the compounding scandals, Texans can be forgiven for any flashbacks to FEMA's disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina. It doesn't help that, like George W. Bush's infamous FEMA Director, Michael Brown, Richardson [lacks](#) a real background in emergency management.

Even the president's typically sharp tongue seems to have been replaced by embarrassing Bushisms. Trump's claim that Noem was "right on the ball" is just his version of "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job."

At least the White House has stopped talking about eliminating FEMA — for now.

Congressional watchdogs have already started asking for an investigation. Last week, Democrats on the House Committee for Oversight and Government Reform wrote a [letter](#) demanding Secretary Noem and FEMA turn over information regarding their response — or lack thereof — to the deadly Hill County flood. Republicans need to join their colleagues and treat this investigation into Secretary Noem as a bipartisan effort.

Closer to home, Harris County leaders have started to ring the alarm about FEMA.

"This vital agency is understaffed and under-resourced creating a dangerous situation for communities vulnerable to natural disasters," Harris County Commissioner Lesley Briones said in a public statement. "In Harris County, we know this all too well."

Texans will do all we can to help our neighbors, but only our representatives in Congress can call Noem and Richardson to testify — much like they did for Michael Brown — and ensure FEMA is better prepared for the next flood.

Because there will be another flood.

Video:

FEMA needs 'improvements' on flood warnings: Texas Governor Abbott

Reuters

July 15, 2025

<https://www.reuters.com/video/watch/idRW985015072025RP1/#:~:text=FEMA%20needs%20'improvements'%20on%20flood%20warnings%3A%20Texas%20Governor%20Abbott,-July%2030%2C%202025&text=Texas%20Governor%20Greg%20Abbott%20on,through%20all%20the%20red%20tape.%22>