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FEMA: Increased Demand and Capacity Strains

Introduction

Disasters in the United States have become more frequent, severe, and expensive in recent years. Government agencies and scientific experts expect these trends to continue due to climate change and increased development and population in areas vulnerable to hazards. These factors have intensified demands on the resources, programs, and personnel of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—the agency responsible for leading federal disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation efforts and administering assistance under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act, P.L. 93, 288, as amended). Consequences include attrition and staffing shortages, strained operational efforts, and insufficient disaster relief funds.

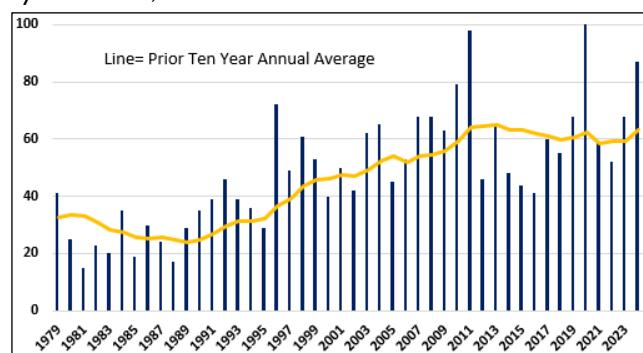
As FEMA faces growing demand for its assistance and related challenges, Congress may consider the scope of FEMA's mission, the appropriate role of the federal government in emergency management, and how to shore up FEMA's workforce.

Growing Demands on FEMA

Stafford Act Declaration Trends

The average number of Stafford Act major disaster declarations has increased from an average of 39 per fiscal year in the first decade after its enactment (FY1988-1997) to an average of 63 in the most recent ten fiscal years—an increase of 61%. That increase grows to approximately 150% when comparing to the first decade of FEMA's existence (FY1979-1988), which averaged 25 major disaster declarations per fiscal year (Figure 1).

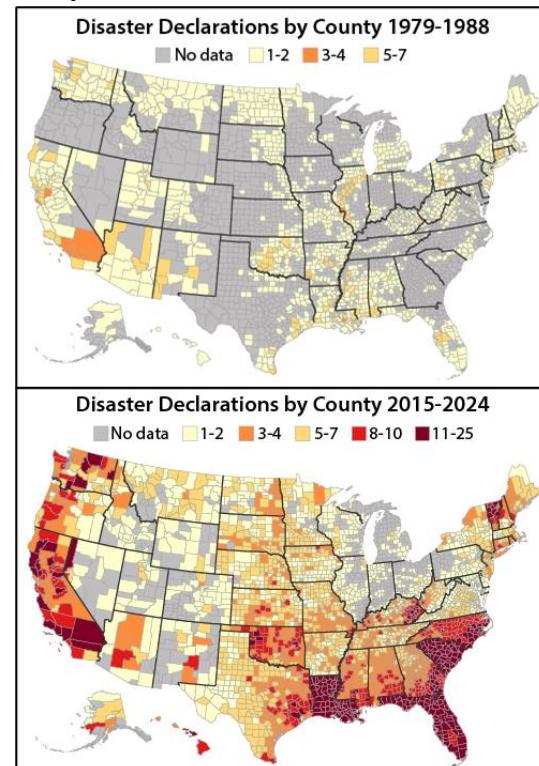
Figure 1. Stafford Act Major Disasters Declared By Fiscal Year, Since Establishment of FEMA



Sources: CRS analysis of OpenFEMA, "Declarations Summaries," as of 10/01/2024, and FEMA, Disaster Relief Fund: Monthly Reports.

Additionally, more counties experienced a greater number of declaration activity in the past 10 years than in the first decade of FEMA's existence (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Number of Disaster Declarations by County

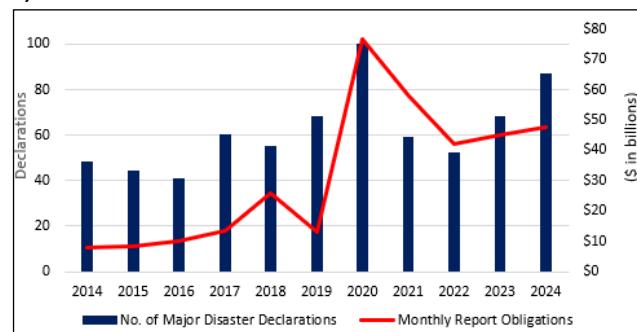


Source: CRS analysis of OpenFEMA, "Declarations Summaries," as of 10/23/2024.

Notes: Excludes declarations for the COVID-19 pandemic and approximately 1.5% of declarations that lack associated county FIPS code digits.

In recent years, the number of declarations with Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) obligations over \$1 billion has increased, driving an overall increase in DRF obligations (see Figure 3). Since 2020, annual DRF obligations have consistently exceeded nearly \$40 billion—a level never reached prior to FY2020.

Figure 3. DRF Obligations vs Disaster Declarations By Fiscal Year



Sources: CRS analysis of OpenFEMA, "Declarations Summaries," as of 10/01/2024, and FEMA, Disaster Relief Fund: Monthly Reports.

Staffing Constraints

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) and FEMA have identified staffing gaps within FEMA's disaster workforce. In FY2022, FEMA missed its target staffing level of 17,670 by 6,200 personnel (35%). Actual gaps are likely higher, as the agency's staffing targets were developed in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (which created significant demands on FEMA). Staffing gaps in particular specialties (or cadres), such as logistics and planning, vary. FEMA's permanent employee numbers have remained largely stable over the past decade, and overall staffing (including reservists) has increased since FY2017. However, these staffing increases do not reflect the FY2020 spike in or subsequent higher level of obligations.

Figure 4. DRF Obligations vs. FEMA Staffing

By Fiscal Year (nominal \$billions)



Source: CRS analysis of Fedscope and Obligations from DRF Monthly Reports as of 10/01/2024, in nominal dollars.

Notes: Employee counts are as of September. Total employees reflect hires under all available authorities. Full-time employees (FTEs) refer those hired under Title 5 of the U.S. Code.

Expanding Mission

Presidents have recently used the Stafford Act to respond to incidents of unusual complexity, sometimes in novel ways. For instance, the Stafford Act emergency declaration for the COVID-19 pandemic was the first unilateral, nationwide declaration and the first major disaster declaration for an infectious disease incident. In addition, uncommon missions, like those for public health incidents, have increased the burden on the agency.

FEMA's non-declaration activity has also evolved. Since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Congress has expanded FEMA's authorities to provide assistance for preparedness and mitigation against all hazards, and FEMA has assumed an active role in interagency efforts to address climate change. Beginning in 2019, Congress expanded FEMA's Emergency Food and Shelter Program to provide assistance for localities coping with increased migration activity. FEMA has also executed limited operations to assist with unaccompanied migrant children and Afghan refugees, which has raised concerns among some Members of Congress that the agency has been activated for incidents beyond its mission and capacity.

Policy Options

Meet Demands Through Increased Appropriations

Congress could further increase appropriations for FEMA operations and staffing in response to demands on the

agency. Congress has, in recent years, provided more funding to FEMA's DRF: total appropriations for the DRF since FY2017 have generally dwarfed those of earlier years.

Narrow Scope of FEMA's Mission

Elected officials, emergency managers, and other stakeholders have long debated exactly what constitutes a disaster that should receive federal assistance. FEMA and GAO have both recommended that the agency increase the thresholds used to evaluate requests for Stafford Act major disaster declarations. This could reduce disaster spending, reduce demands on FEMA's workforce, and enhance the availability of FEMA resources for the most catastrophic incidents. Additionally, FEMA has argued that reducing declarations for smaller incidents could incentivize nonfederal investments in disaster resiliency, as states will not expect as much federal disaster assistance. Many nonfederal stakeholders have criticized this approach, arguing that it simply shifts costs to nonfederal entities, whose disaster spending has also increased.

Further Incentivize Mitigation and Preparedness

According to one analysis, FEMA obligates \$7 or more on response and recovery for every dollar obligated for mitigation. This imbalance—and an expectation of ample relief funds—may disincentivize resiliency, thereby increasing long-term demands on FEMA.

Implementing more mitigation projects could reduce the burdens on FEMA response and recovery operations in the long term. A National Institute of Building Sciences study concludes that federal mitigation grants save \$6 for every \$1 spent, in addition to saving lives and preventing disruption; the same study estimates that FEMA saves approximately \$700 million annually (in 2018 dollars) as a result of mitigation investments. Since 2020, Congress and FEMA have made available historic amounts of funding for mitigation—but much of it remains unspent. Insufficient capacity and reluctance to execute certain measures (e.g., elevating or removing structures in hazard zones) may both contribute to this hesitancy.

Strengthen the Federal Disaster Workforce

FEMA's workforce has experienced high turnover and attrition in recent years. Reports of morale differ, though some indicate morale declines due to increased workloads and prolonged disaster deployments, among other factors. Recent reports of threats to FEMA personnel may exacerbate morale challenges.

Some recent analysis shows that FEMA has made progress in addressing some workplace issues, like harassment and employee development. Congress could further address concerns about staff retention and recruitment by augmenting FEMA appropriations for hiring, shortening deployment terms, and further enhancing employee development and training. FEMA could also consider proposals to launch a new disaster corps to enhance nonfederal emergency management and economic capacity.

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