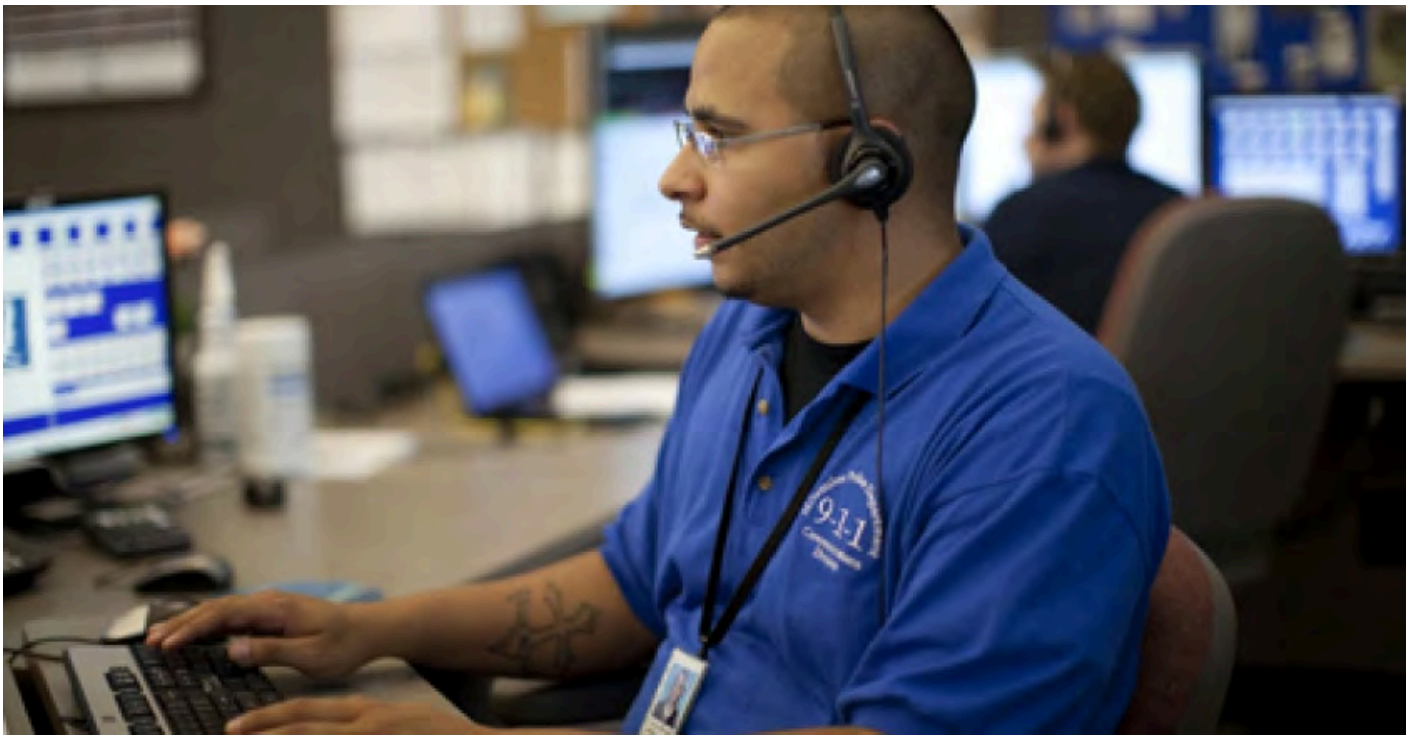
VOICES

Aging 911 Systems Are Failing Millions — NG911 Is the Answer

Moving to Next-Gen 911 is more than just a technical challenge; it's a moral imperative as public safety agencies work to meet the needs of all Americans, including those with disabilities or language barriers, during emergencies.

April 03, 2025



Government Technology/David Kidd

Getting help is just a phone call away for the more than 240 million calls placed to 911 each year. Yet for those with hearing impairments, imagine being trapped in a burning building and trying to communicate with the 911 operator on the other line. Consider a person having a medical emergency who doesn’t speak English very well and can't describe what is happening. Or a mother fleeing a domestic violence incident, with children in tow: She needs to call 911 but is terrified her abuser will overhear her and

make the situation worse. These life-or-death situations are everyday scenarios faced by millions of Americans when trying to reach emergency services.

The country's outdated 911 infrastructure is woefully failing to serve more than 11 million deaf or hard of hearing Americans, and over 25.7 million people who aren't proficient in English. Since 911 was established as the universal emergency number in 1968, the emergency call system has remained largely a voice-only technology, leaving our most vulnerable populations with inequitable access to life-saving services.

The patchwork of 911 capabilities across the country stems from the decentralized nature of emergency response systems. As 911 response falls under the purview of state and local governments, this has created a fragmented landscape where one county may have access to new technologies while their neighbors down the road remain limited to legacy voice-only systems.

Recognizing the critical need for modernization, the Federal Communications Commission recently adopted new rules requiring cellphone service providers to upgrade their technology to support Next-Generation 911 (NG911) calls across the country, which enable text, photo and video communications with 911 operators.

While cellphone carriers will soon be required to provide NG911 capabilities, the responsibility still falls to state and local 911 call centers to integrate the technology needed to seamlessly receive and process these new modes of communication. This transformation represents not just a technical challenge, but a moral imperative to ensure equitable access to emergency services.

A major, transformative feature of NG911 is real-time text (RTT), which enables seamless communication for deaf and hard-of-hearing people. Through RTT, individuals can type messages that appear instantaneously on 911 operators' screens, much like an instant message conversation. This is a dramatic improvement over the obsolete Telecommunication Device for the Deaf (TDD) system and will provide immediate relief for these communities to communicate during emergencies without relying on outdated technology.

The benefits of NG911 extend beyond RTT. For example, AI-powered foreign langu identification and instant translation tools can immediately recognize a caller's language and connect them with the appropriate translator in real time. New video capabilities will also allow 911 operators to connect with callers over video and assess situations visually, which can provide critical context that saves lives.

Modernizing 911 goes beyond technological upgrades — it's about ensuring all U.S. residents have equal access to life-saving services. Jurisdictions and states that adopt inclusive assistive technologies will create a stronger, more resilient emergency response network while helping to ease the burden on overworked, understaffed 911 operators.

Some leading communities have already begun this critical transformation. The North Carolina 911 Board last year finalized its transition to NG911, making it only the 10th state to do so. Similarly, the state of Ohio recently began its transition to NG911 when 2 of 10 pilot counties implemented the system. These success stories demonstrate what is possible with commitment and funding, but far too many communities remain stuck in the analog past.

State and local leaders across the country need to make modernization a top budget priority for 2025. The United States today is increasingly multilingual and disability inclusive, and our emergency response systems need to catch up. Regardless of their language, hearing ability or personal circumstances, everyone deserves equitable access to life-saving services.

Modernizing 911 is not just a technical challenge — it's a moral imperative. NG911 will save lives and create a stronger, more resilient emergency response network.

Rob Farmer is the national director of sales for Vertex NG911 at CentralSquare Technologies. His background includes over 30 years of experience in public safety in Ohio, Texas and Florida.

©2025 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. E.REPUBLIC LLC
DO NOT SELL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION | PRIVACY & AI

RECOVERY

Bill Would Increase Transparency for Nat'l Flood Insurance

Legislation introduced in Congress aims to help homeowners better understand the rising costs of premiums under the National Flood Insurance Program, part of FEMA's newly implemented Risk Rating 2.0 initiative.

September 20, 2024 • Bill O'Boyle, The Times Leader

Adobe Stock/bilanol

(TNS) — U.S. Rep. Matt Cartwright on Friday will introduce the National Flood Insurance Premium Transparency Act to empower homeowners to better understand — and mitigate — rising premiums under the Federal Emergency Management Agency's newly implemented Risk Rating 2.0 program.

In October 2021, Cartwright said the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) instituted a new policy premium pricing system — known as Risk Rating 2.0 — for National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) policyholders.

"By reducing inequities and better assessing a specific property's flood risk, NFIP policyholders were meant to pay a more accurate premium under this new system," said Cartwright, D-Moosic.

When FEMA rolled out this new policy in April of 2023, however, Cartwright said FEMA's updates to flood maps across Northeastern Pennsylvania — and the nation —expanded the number of homeowners now required to buy flood insurance and increased premiums for existing NFIP policyholders.

"Risk Rating 2.0 has left many Northeastern Pennsylvania homeowners in the dark, wondering why their premiums are going up and what they can do about it," Cartwright said. "My bill would ensure that the flood insurance rating process is significantly more transparent, which will help policyholders better understand FEMA's new requirements, research how to lower their property's flood risk, and protect their financial security."

Specifically, Cartwright's National Flood Insurance Premium Transparency Act would require:

—Insurance companies to provide NFIP policyholders with a full list of property flood risk factors on their declaration page, including available discounts and any flood insurance requirements;

—FEMA to develop an interactive flood insurance information tool. With this tool, NFIP policyholders and prospective homeowners would be able to assess their property's

flood insurance premium and risk information. Additionally, this tool would provide information as to how different mitigation options would impact a property's premium and overall flood risk;

—The Government Accountability Office to publish a report outlining the feasibility of adding additional information to the above-mentioned flood insurance information tool.

Luzerne County Manager Romilda Crocamo voiced support of Rep. Cartwright's bill.

"As the County Manager of Luzerne County — a county that has experienced the devastation from floods — I am proud to support Congressman Cartwright's groundbreaking legislation aimed at promoting greater transparency in FEMA's flood insurance requirements," Crocamo said. "This initiative is vital for policyholders as it empowers them with the information they need to navigate the complexities of flood insurance, particularly in understanding new requirements that affect their coverage and financial security."

Crocamo said homeowners living in flood-prone areas face constant uncertainty and the daunting risk of losing their homes to devastating floods.

"By providing clearer guidelines and resources, this legislation will help individuals research and implement effective strategies to lower their property's flood risk," Crocamo said. "It is crucial that these homeowners have the tools and knowledge to protect their most valued asset — their home."

Crocamo went on to say that this legislation recognizes the financial burden that high insurance premiums can impose on families already facing the threat of natural disasters.

"By fostering a more transparent system, this legislation can alleviate some of the financial stress associated with flood insurance, ensuring that homeowners are not left to bear the brunt of exorbitant costs while trying to safeguard their homes," Crocamo said. "Congressman Cartwright's efforts are a beacon of hope for those who reside in flood-affected regions. By advocating for transparency and clarity, this legislation will offer residents the peace of mind they deserve, allowing them to focus on building t' lives without the looming fear of financial ruin."

Crocamo added, "With Congressman Cartwright's leadership, together we can ensure that homeowners are equipped with the necessary knowledge and resources to protect their homes and secure their financial future against the threat of floods."

Lackawanna County Commissioner Bill Gaughan said meetings are held regularly with municipal officials throughout Lackawanna County, and stormwater management and flood control are high on their agendas.

"We fully support Rep. Cartwright's bill because transparent flood insurance pricing will help local policyholders understand FEMA's new risk rating and provide information on how they can lower their premiums and mitigate flood risk," Gaughan said.

Cartwright said this legislation is also endorsed by the Appalachian Citizens Law Center, the Association of State Floodplain Managers, the Environmental Defense Fund, the National Association of Flood and Stormwater Management Agencies, and the National Wildlife Federation.

"The National Flood Insurance Program Premium Transparency Act is a critical step forward in empowering property owners with the information they need to understand their flood risk and make informed decisions, and the Association of State Floodplain Managers (ASFPM) supports Congressman Cartwright's effort in this area," said Chad Berginnis, ASFPM Executive Director. "By requiring transparency in flood risk factors and offering tools to explore mitigation options, this legislation will not only enhance public awareness but also promote safer, more resilient communities and drive meaningful action in floodplain management."

Peter Waggonner, organizer for the Coalition for Sustainable Flood Insurance (CSFI), said NFIP policyholders and CSFI members continue to question the transparency and accuracy of Risk Rating 2.0's methodology and data sources.

"While FEMA strives to provide improved tools and resources for policyholders, the National Flood Insurance Program Premium Transparency Act is a sensible, standardized solution to ensure timely progress towards this common goal," Waggoner said.

Rebecca Shelton, Director of Policy at the Appalachian Citizens' Law Center, said with inland flooding disasters on the rise throughout Appalachia, "we need to do everything that we can in order to inform residents about the risks to their properties, potential mitigation strategies, and ensure that they have access to flood insurance."

Shelton added, "The National Flood Insurance Program Premium Transparency Act begins to tackle these serious issues. Congressman Cartwright's bill will give residents access to more information about their property, flooding and flood insurance."

©2024 The Times Leader (Wilkes-Barre, Pa.). Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

©2025 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. E.REPUBLIC LLC
DO NOT SELL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION | PRIVACY & AI

PREPAREDNESS AND COMMUNICATIONS

Houston Area Preps for Hurricane Season, Will Lean on State

Amid uncertainty at FEMA and no guarantee of federal recovery funds, emergency managers in the Houston metro area say they have plans in place to handle the upcoming hurricane season and will seek state assistance as needed.

May 23, 2025 • Catherine Dominguez, Houston Chronicle

(TNS) — FEMA funding and aid may be uncertain ahead of hurricane season, but Houston-area emergency management officials say they are prepared for the disasters and will seek assistance from the state for recovery efforts if necessary.

In January, President Donald Trump issued an executive order establishing the FEMA Review Council to determine whether the Federal Emergency Management Agenc equipped to address disasters across the United States.

Since then, Trump has made cuts to the agency. Earlier this month, the Associated Press reported that David Richardson, a former Marine Corps officer, was named acting administrator of FEMA just after Cameron Hamilton, who'd been leading the agency, was fired.

"There is obviously a lot to be figured out," said Brad Burness, emergency management coordinator for Galveston County.

Weather watchers already see signs of "near-average" storm activity for the Gulf of Mexico. A normal hurricane season produces 14 named systems in the Atlantic, based on data from 1991 to 2020. Seven of those named storms typically become hurricanes with at least 74 mph wind speeds. Three hurricanes on average become major hurricanes, reaching Category 3 status or higher, with wind speeds of at least 111 mph.

Galveston County is no stranger to preparing for storms but Burness said recovery efforts will likely fall more on the state's shoulders.

"We will be looking to them for guidance and we will be partnering with the state to ensure our citizens are recovering from any natural disaster," he said.

Jason Millsaps, executive director of the Montgomery County Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security, said his county is ready. Millsaps said Montgomery County is one of the few counties in the state with an emergency supply warehouse.

"As we approach hurricane season, our OEM logistics team begins to stockpile supplies and prepare supplies for rapid deployment," Millsaps said. "We are uniquely positioned to respond to any disaster."

Millsaps said his office will work with the state for any recovery needs.

"We are confident in our planning and coordination with the state, that any needs will be addressed timely," Millsaps said.

Officials with Harris County did not return calls for comment.

Gov. Greg Abbott, who, along with Texas Division of Emergency Management Chief Nim Kidd, was appointed by Trump to serve on the FEMA Review Council, said in an April news release that he would work to ensure the state gets the federal support it needs.

"As governor of Texas, I have seen firsthand the critical role emergency management plays to protect Texans and our communities when disaster strikes," Abbott said. "That is why Texas built the strongest emergency management operation in the nation, rooted in swift action, local control, and strong partnerships."

Abbott said the council will ensure FEMA becomes more responsive, efficient and supportive of state-led disaster efforts nationwide.

Kidd said collaboration with local, state, and federal partners is needed.

"I remain committed to seeking solutions that optimize FEMA's effectiveness for the American people," Kidd said in April. "Working together, we can synchronize the efforts of local, state, and federal partners to support Texans and all Americans."

In a preview of possible policy changes with FEMA, Richardson also said there would be more "cost-sharing with the states," the Associated Press reported.

"We're going to find out how to do things better, and we're going find out how to push things down to the states that should be done at the state level," Richardson said. "Also going to find out how we can do more cost sharing with the states."

© 2025 the Houston Chronicle. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

©2025 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. E.REPUBLIC LLC
DO NOT SELL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION | PRIVACY & AI

PREPAREDNESS AND COMMUNICATIONS

Medical Drone Trials to Test Supply Drops for Emergencies

The Drone814 initiative in the greater Johnstown, Pa., area will use drones to deliver supplies like defibrillators and EpiPens to local emergency scenes. The trials will compare the drones' speed to that of an ambulance.

April 16, 2025 • David Hurst, The Tribune-Democrat

(TNS) — An initiative using aerial drones to deliver defibrillators, EpiPens and other medical supplies to local emergency scenes has been cleared for a test run.

Drone814 partners plan to begin airlifting supplies across Greater Johnstown this summer through medical drone trials — in a bid to show the world that the effort can save lives and medical costs, ATA Aviation Managing Director John Eberhardt said

The partnership called Drone814 will begin coordinating aerial drone deliveries of medical supplies this summer across part of the Greater Johnstown area.

From there, the sky's the limit, with the group hopeful the effort will also deliver high-salary jobs in the area, he said.

The launch signals “a new era of high-tech emergency response” that will expand across the state if the Johnstown pilot project proves successful, Aerium Chairman Larry Nulton said.

“This initiative doesn’t just push the boundaries of what’s possible in emergency response; it opens new doors for our local workforce and sets the tone for how technology and community impact can go hand-in-hand,” he said.

Virginia-based ATA Aviation, which is in the process of opening a three-employee office in Richland Township, is working with Richland Township-based aviation nonprofit Aerium, the Cambria County Department of Emergency Services and the Southern Alleghenies Planning and Development Commission on the project.

ATA Aviation is implementing the operational "software" framework for the multi-modal mobility project.

‘Pilot’ phase

According to Eberhardt, preliminary systems tests will start in June, including "mock deliveries" designed to ensure that the drones — and their safety procedures — are operating properly before they are dispatched to accident and emergency scenes.

Aerial drones about the size of a Weber barbecue grill will be equipped to carry the supplies and be operated remotely by licensed "pilots" from a site at the John Murtha Johnstown-Cambria County Airport in Richland Township.

The goal is to start deploying them for live medical delivery "trials" over two separate periods in July and August, he said.

"During that period, if someone calls 911 and reports an incident the medical drones (can support) in Greater Johnstown, they'll be dispatched in addition to local ambulance services," Eberhardt said.

The goal is to track how quickly life-saving aid can be delivered to the scene by aerial drone, compared to by ambulance. And Drone814 will also track data on the medical side to outline the savings that faster responses mean – not just in terms of lives, but also projected savings through faster treatment and recovery times, he added.

"When it comes to cardiac arrest, or a bleed, or an overdose, it's proven that the faster you provide (essential aid) the less time someone is in the hospital, the less therapy they might need afterward," Eberhardt said.

Drone814 partners will handle the test runs, with the goal of getting funding — and the official clearance — to begin making drone response a 24/7 operation in Johnstown, he added.

The Drone814 program received U.S. Department of Transportation approval to use the airspace over most of Johnstown, Ferndale, East Conemaugh and the West Hills this summer to deliver “critical” supplies to accident and emergency scenes.

The trial project was funded in 2024 by a $2 million federal grant, enabling Cambria County officials to install a network of drone-specific radio sensors across the county.

It was a necessary step to avoid signal interference with other air traffic, while also permitting drone operators to legally fly the devices outside their line of sight, officials said at the time.

Rural response

When emergency officials are alerted about a cardiac arrest, aerial drones would have a clear, direct path to the scene to drop off an AED device. If an overdose is reported, Narcan spray could be delivered just as quickly to a caller at the scene — likely before an ambulance or fire crew arrives.

Eberhardt said boxes with color-coded compartments will be loaded within the drone's supplies, enabling a 911 dispatcher to instruct a caller on which one to open, depending on the type of medical emergency.

"Once the drone lands and delivers the supplies, it won't be any different than a typical emergency call," Eberhardt said, adding that 911 telecommunicators often find themselves instructing people how to render aid until ambulance paramedics arrive.

Those "seconds count" when someone is suffering from a cardiac arrest, said Johnstown fire Chief Bob Statler, who praised the initiative. He said the new technology will likely have a big impact in remote areas of the region.

“Because of the call volume, Johnstown is a great place to (test) this project,” said Statler, “but I think it’s going to be the rural areas, locally and all over the U.S., that will really benefit. There are areas in Somerset and Bedford counties where the nearest ambulance might be 30 minutes away.”

Job creator

Aerium and its partners, including St. Francis University, have launched drone aviation programs in recent years to cultivate a workforce of drone pilots locally. Drone814’s operations and anticipated growth will fuel a need for local talent, officials said.

Eberhardt said the initiative will need Federal Aviation Administration-certified drone pilots, mechanics to keep the unmanned aircraft running as designed. Staff will also be needed to load supplies onto the remote aircraft if the program gets the clearance to go full-time.

He said certified drone pilots earn salaries of $75,000 to $150,000 annually, so "these will be great local jobs." And the need for those jobs would only multiple as the effo

expanded into neighboring counties, he added.

Somerset County is already taking steps to become part of an expanded drone network once the testing phase is completed. Last week, the Somerset County commissioners approved an $18,000 contract with the SAPDC to enable the program to move into the northern part of Somerset County.

© 2025 The Tribune-Democrat (Johnstown, Pa.). Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

©2025 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. E.REPUBLIC LLC
DO NOT SELL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION | PRIVACY & AI

RECOVERY

Opinion: Celebrating Resilience Post-Disaster Isn't Enough

As disasters like severe flooding in Appalachia become more regular occurrences, we must do more than celebrate community resilience. Investments in infrastructure and systems that can withstand major events are essential.

February 21, 2025 • Tiffany Sturdivant, Lexington Herald-Leader

Water more than six feet high flooded the Appalshop main building, including the WMMT community radio station studio, in Whitesburg, Ky., last summer during a flood that devastated Eastern Kentucky.
Ryan C. Hermens/TNS

(TNS) — In the early hours of July 28, 2022, the North Fork of the Kentucky River rose out of its banks in Whitesburg. In only a few hours, the water broke the 1957 record to reach over 22 feet. The devastation across Eastern Kentucky was unthinkable. Buildings were ruined, homes washed away, and — most heartbreaking of all — 45

people lost their lives. Media and meteorologists alike called it a historic “thousand-year flood.”

Over the next thirty months, we worked hard to recover. As a community, we mucked homes, grieved lives lost, filled out forms, and donated to mutual aid funds. At Appalshop—the Eastern Kentucky media arts nonprofit I lead — we had to leave our beloved building in Whitesburg, find temporary office space, and continue trying to be an anchor institution while also working through the same trauma. Slowly, folks began moving back into renovated homes. They started new businesses. They returned to the places their ancestors had lived in for generations. All the while, passing storms caused fear.

Unfortunately, the weather didn’t wait another thousand years. It didn’t even wait a thousand days. On Feb. 15, 202 — 935 days after the historic July 2022 flood — Letcher County once again found itself under water.

Natural disasters have become a regular part of the news cycle, from devastating flooding across Central Appalachia and the South to widespread wildfires on our West Coast to record-setting hurricanes on our East Coast. Rather than flukes, these disasters are signs of a much larger troubling trend. Consistently facing existential crises weakens our stability. It forces us into the never-ending cycle of making due instead of offering space for permanent planning. Fortunately, innovation and ingenuity are exactly what Appalachians do best—especially when necessary.

This time, Appalshop was more prepared. In those 935 days, we had settled into a second-story office space in Jenkins, Ky., and built out a studio for our radio station on Whitesburg’s less-flood-prone Main Street. We even bought a building high on a hill, though it needs a lot of TLC.

Our archive, which flooded in 2022, is now safely stored in our new spaces or is with restoration experts across the country. Our staff are safe—though some were once again displaced. We are doing our best to connect community resources to those in

need, especially as this time around we are not facing summer heat but, instead, freezing temperatures and snow.

Yet for all the preparation, it's hard not to ask why? Why must Appalachia continue to accept unprecedented as the new normal? With each devastating turn, we are celebrated for our resilience.

I'll let you in on a little secret: to me, resilience is not something to be celebrated. I cringe when I hear this word used to describe our region. We should be allowed to strengthen as a community without being knocked down every thousand days. We should be allowed to celebrate the importance of rest and stability. Appalachia has been in the national spotlight for our economic woes (according to the US Census Bureau, 23.8% of folks in Letcher County, Ky., live in poverty), but we also know that we are rich in community, family, and history. Rural life can be challenging, but it is also a blessing.

So, as we once again face the trauma and challenges of unprecedented weather disasters, I call on Appalachia to not just survive but to thrive. As a region, we must work with our legislators to support infrastructure that can withstand floods, fires, and mudslides. We must shift our priorities to ensure everyone has reliable access to power, water, and internet. We must innovate a new economy that champions local businesses and celebrates the beautiful mountains we call home. We must create opportunities that allow us to reinvest in ourselves.

Appalshop is built on the foundation of collecting and sharing stories to celebrate and preserve the history of all Appalachians. We are but one small branch of the creative tree that is rooted in this region. Together, let's grieve our losses, muck out our houses, and then put our heads together with our local and state legislators to create a new vision for Appalachia that rejects resilience as the only path forward.

Tiffany Sturdivant is Executive Director of Appalshop, a media arts nonprofit in Letcher County, Ky.

©2025 Lexington Herald-Leader. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

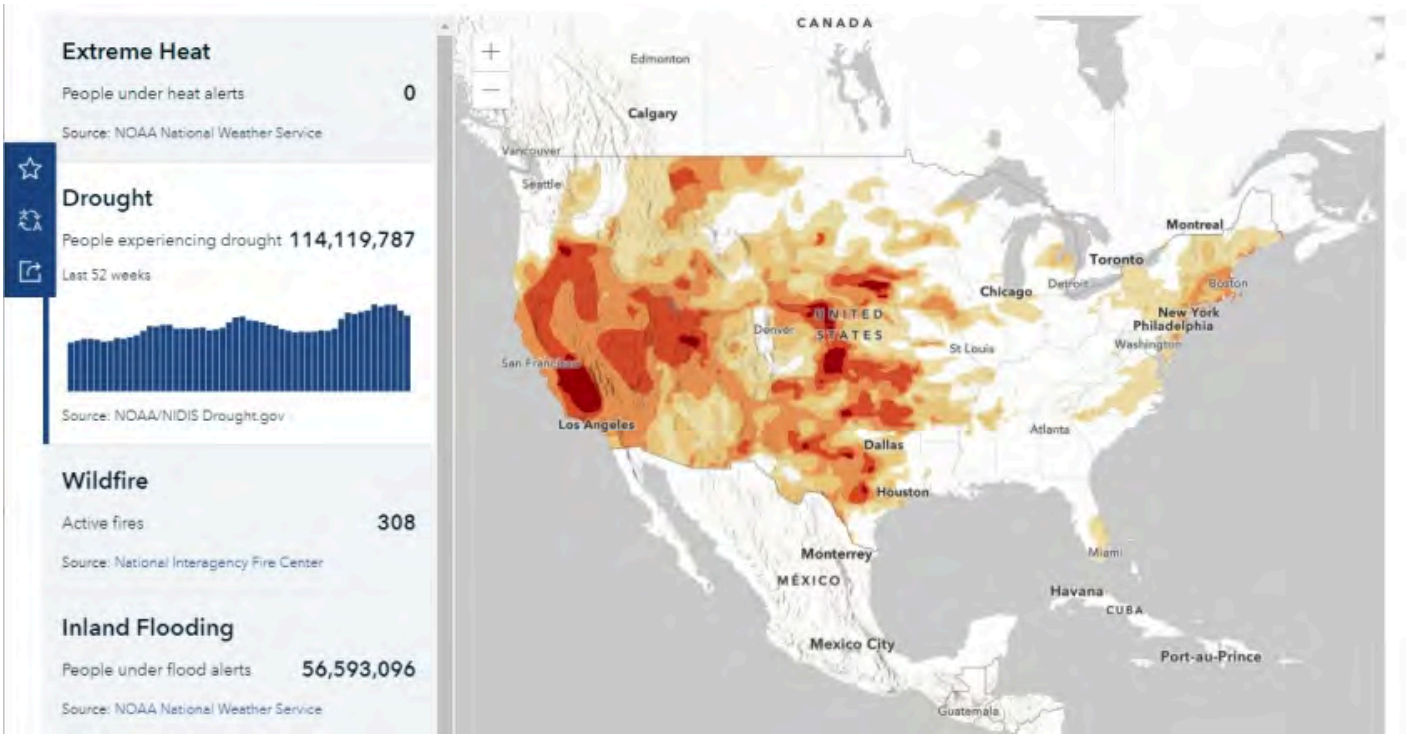
©2025 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. E.REPUBLIC LLC
DO NOT SELL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION | PRIVACY & AI

RECOVERY

Primed to Burn: The Difficulties of Insuring Homes

Nationwide, insurance companies have been drastically raising premiums or pulling out of areas due to fire risk. The issue seems to have recently hit home for Santa Feans, many of whom have been facing policy non-renewals.

April 29, 2024 • Maya Hilty, The Santa Fe New Mexican



Screenshot of real-time monitoring dashboard on the Climate Mapping for Resilience and Adaptation portal.

(TNS) - Conditions are ripe for major wildfires in New Mexico, with an overpopulation of trees, abundance of dead or unhealthy trees and dried-out stands, arborist Chris Schaum said Saturday.

"We're primed to burn; we've been primed to burn for a long, long time," said Schaum, owner of the Santa Fe-based tree-management business Chris' Tree Service.

"It's kind of gloomy, but at the same time, I feel like we do have answers to be able to handle this," he said.

That answer: Ramping up individual and community-scale work to mitigate the spread of fires, speakers said at a fire-preparedness workshop Saturday at Christ Church Santa Fe.

The volunteer nonprofit Villages of Santa Fe and the Fire Adapted New Mexico Learning Network organized the workshop; the groups have put on an annual fire-preparedness workshop most years since 2018, Villages of Santa Fe co-founder Ann Church said.

About 50 people attended the event, a larger turnout than in the past, Mayor Alan Webber noted at the opening of the event.

"We know this is critical. We know that climate change is making it even more critical," Webber said. "I think it's a heightened awareness that we all need to have that being prepared is important."

After breakout groups focused on fire simulations around Santa Fe, assembling emergency supply kits and hardening homes against fire, the workshop featured a panel on how fires are affecting homeowners insurance in Santa Fe and across the state. The panel included Schaum; state Natural Resources Department Forestry Division spokesman George Ducker; and two bureau chiefs from the state Office of Superintendent of Insurance, Melissa Robertson and Elouisa "Lou" Macias.

Nationwide, insurance companies have been drastically raising premiums or pulling out of areas due to fire risk. The issue seems to have recently hit home for Santa Feans, many of whom have been facing policy nonrenewals, said panel moderator Madeleine Carey.

Schaum said he started to hear about insurance companies dropping customers around Santa Fe in about 2016.

That's because catastrophic losses from wildfires have become a matter of "not if but when," Robertson said. As a result, insurance companies need to spread their risk and take only some policies here, some policies there — not only in areas of high wildfire risk but also in towns, since embers can spread wildfire, she said.

"Yes, a company might be dropping you, but another company is willing to pick you up," Robertson said. She recommended people who lose homeowners insurance find an independent agent — who "can run you 30, 40, 50 quotes at a time" — to shop around among insurers.

Although the Office of the Superintendent of Insurance cannot mandate where insurance companies write policies, leaders in the office, for about the past year and a half, have been dedicating "90 percent" of their time to learning more about the science of fire and working one on one with insurers on the issue, Robertson added.

Nine insurance companies have completely pulled out of California. None have pulled out of New Mexico, Robertson said.

"We don't ... want to end up like California," Robertson said. "That is why it is so vital right now that OSI is working with the industry. We have meetings with them almost every other day."

The Office of Superintendent of Insurance has also assembled a team of people, including state forestry officials, the state Fire Marshal, Santa Fe city Fire Chief Jacob Black, arborists and other organizations to draft legislation that will help New Mexicans maintain insurance. The legislation would likely take "baby steps" toward requiring fire-safe building codes or other mitigation measures to make communities more resilient to fire.

"We are in a hard market where you might want to protect your land, you want to do mitigation on your land, but your neighbor does not, and we can't force them to," Robertson explained.

Schaum said more Santa Feans are beginning to act to mitigate fire.

"It's really become a reality for all of us," he said. "When people start to have to worry about not getting insurances and mortgages and all this stuff ... people actually want to get this stuff taken care of.

"It's not anything we need to panic about, but it's definitely something we need to work on as a community."

___

©2024 The Santa Fe New Mexican *(Santa Fe, N.M.)*
Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

©2025 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. E.REPUBLIC LLC
DO NOT SELL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION | PRIVACY & AI

VOICES

Seminole County, Fla., Fire Dept. Builds App for Wilderness Rescue

To drastically cut response times to people needing help on remote trails, the Seminole County Fire Department created an internal app using lay-of-the-land expertise and countywide collaboration.

April 24, 2025 • Lakshmi Sankaran

In the fire service, few technologies have shaved more precious minutes off response times than GPS. Street addresses can be quickly plugged into any phone, tablet or computer, complete with turn-by-turn navigation and live traffic congestion updates.

But what about the areas that don't have an address to be entered?

For Seminole County, Fla. — home to nearly 140 miles of trails and over 7,000 acr

wilderness areas — this presented a serious and growing concern. Calls for assistance on trails and in preserved wilderness areas have increased steadily over the past three years, with more residents gravitating toward the outdoors since the COVID-19 pandemic. Growing visitor attendance has also added extra response complexity, with many callers being unfamiliar with the area where they need assistance.

For trails response times, the average was two to three hours. Firefighters with the Seminole County Fire Department (SCFD), themselves hikers, bikers and hunters, were aware that apps existed to allow real-time tracking and reference without a cellular connection. But was there something for first responders to help significantly cut search and rescue times for trails response?

“We looked at a lot of private vendors, but ultimately found that creating an in-house resource was the best solution,” said Lt. Ed Castlen, whose experience working and running calls in Seminole County’s rural Geneva community made him a natural fit to help spearhead the SCFD trails app project. “Along with trails training, we’ve worked on a rescue marker sign project for our trails over the past decade, but there’s no guarantee that a hiker or biker will notice them or be near one when an emergency happens. We needed a customized and comprehensive tool that made use of the technology available to us.”

Working with Seminole County's GIS team after extensive research on capabilities already in the marketplace, the department began work on a proprietary internal app for trails response.

Drawing on firefighters’ knowledge and experience around trail and wilderness rescue, the department expanded the data available in the county’s existing trails GIS map to include important responder-specific information in addition to coordinates and U.S.

National Grid references. Local trails and wilderness areas — official and unofficial — were meticulously cataloged with their location, difficulty, landmarks, trailheads and local nicknames all included for responders’ reference. Importantly, trail accessibility —by bike, utility task vehicle (UTV), or 4x4 truck — is noted along with the location of any access gates.

“With all that data, we can figure out exactly where someone is, how far we can drive, and how far we’re going to have to walk to get to them,” Castlen said.

Partner agencies — most notably the Florida Forest Service — were also key in providing a comprehensive amount of data to inform the app’s map functions.

The upgraded map was incorporated into a proprietary internal application that could be deployed to all department smartphones and tablets. With all data stored on-device, crews could reference all the data in the app in relation to their current location, even without cellular service, thanks to the devices’ built-in internal GPS.

Building an internal app was a tremendous cost savings for the department. Doing the same work with a vendor would have been financially unfeasible.

In order to test the trails app’s real-world use, Castlen and the team conducted an experiment during the department’s trails response training. A firefighter, playing the part of a citizen in distress, called 911 and relayed their location based on what was around them — exactly the information anyone else would have available.

From there, it was a race. Crews at the training would see if they could use the department's traditional methods to beat Castlen, who was using the new trails app, to the patient.

The response crew found the patient in just over an hour. Castlen was there, too, waiting for them. He had reached the patient in just 25 minutes.

With its usability proven, the trails app was deployed to all department devices for crews to use in responses. With the fully offline nature of the app, crews also had the ability to create waypoints, favorites and notes to tailor their individual unit’s map based on their first-due response area.

Since its initial implementation in the department, the trails app's usage has expanded to maritime response for crews conducting rescue operations along the county's lakes, rivers and waterways. Additionally, the county has begun to share access to the app with partner agencies, notably the Seminole County Sheriff's Office and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

"This is an exceptional step forward in our Seminole County Fire Department's response capability," said Fire Chief Matt Kinley. "This tool allows our crews to dramatically increase their situational awareness and effectiveness when responding to calls on our trails and natural lands. Our average trails response times are now about 30 minutes. When we can find people faster, we can get to them faster, which means we can get them the help they need when they need it."

The department plans to continue building new features into the app throughout the coming year. Notably, the addition of a "breadcrumb" feature for crews to accurately track their ingress routes even if they veer off-trail and a localized distance feature to measure between waypoints are on the way.

"More than anything, this underscores the value that can come from having great relationships with your peers in your agency or jurisdiction," Castlen said. "This was the ultimate collaboration between tech-savvy and trail-savvy and that's why it has been successful. None of this would have been possible if we hadn't been able to work closely with everyone at the county. You just can't overstate how much of a team effort this has been."

Lakshmi Sankaran is the data compliance analyst at the Seminole County Fire Department. She worked firsthand with the SCFD team on this collaborative trails apps project. She believes the project's success came from the teamwork involved between the Planning Division, GIS and Information Technology, as well as the firefighters and command staff at the Fire Department.

©2025 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. E.REPUBLIC LLC
DO NOT SELL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION | PRIVACY & AI

PREPAREDNESS AND COMMUNICATIONS

Turmoil at FEMA as States Prepare for Worsening Disasters

Upheaval at the Federal Emergency Management Agency, including the May 8 dismissal of acting director Cameron Hamilton, has experts worried that Americans are now more vulnerable to climate change-fueled disasters.

May 15, 2025 • Hayley Smith, Los Angeles Times

Samuel Girma tries to outrun the heat of a smoldering house as he tries to prevent its spread Nextdoor on LaPaz Road during the Eaton fire, Jan 8, 2025, in Altadena, California.
Robert Gauthier/Los Angeles Times/TNS

(TNS) — The recent firing of the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency is just the latest in a string of blows for the nation's top disaster-response agency, which has been repeatedly undercut by the Trump administration's efforts to rein in spend and restructure the federal government.

The dismissal of acting director Cameron Hamilton on May 8 adds to ongoing layoffs, budget cuts, grant cancellations and leadership changes at FEMA, and officials now say the agency could run out of money as soon as July. That's just in time for "danger season" — the time of year when extreme weather events typically peak and converge.

Experts say the turmoil at FEMA will leave millions of American vulnerable as climate-change-fueled disasters get worse in the months and years ahead — particularly as Trump seeks to shift more of the burden of disaster response away from the federal government and onto the states. In the wake of January's destructive firestorm in Los Angeles, FEMA notably opted to break from its decades-long tradition of testing soil for contaminants, as The Times first reported.

"I'm very worried about what the next few months look like for communities that are going to be impacted by a wildfire, or a tornado, or a hurricane, or a flood," said Rob Moore, a senior policy analyst at the nonprofit Natural Resources Defense Council. "The assistance that we have come to rely upon is no longer there. It's just not there."

In recent months, the president has called for shrinking or even eliminating FEMA, which he accused in a Jan. 24 executive order of overspending and political bias. At a press conference in L.A. following the fires, Trump described FEMA as a "very expensive and mostly failed situation."

"You don't need FEMA — you need a good state government," Trump said.

But California, along with the rest of the nation, is struggling to keep pace with more frequent and destructive environmental disasters fueled by human-caused climate change. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration documented 27 weather- and climate-related disasters in 2024 that each measured at least $1 billion in losses, just shy of the record 28 billion-dollar disasters set in 2023.

Over the last five years, California alone has suffered catastrophic atmospheric rivers and flooding, devastating drought and water shortages, deadly heat waves and record-shattering wildfires — not to mention earthquakes, snowstorms and even a rare tropical storm. The disasters have racked up billions in losses — the L.A. fires are estimated to have cost $250 billion— and experts say they are only likely to worsen in years ahead.

Responding to such disasters is more than any single state can handle, particularly smaller states but even one like California, which has the fourth-largest economy in the world, according to Pete Maysmith, president of the nonprofit League of Conservation Voters.

“States — whether it’s California or any state — need the federal government as these disasters get more and more intense,” Maysmith said. “We all have different connections to different places that have been ravaged and savaged by floods and by fires and by tornadoes and by hurricanes, and it’s the role of the federal government to care for the people of this country when disaster strikes.”

FEMA officials told The Times the agency is working to strengthen and enhance its partnerships with state, local and tribal governments, and that it is committed to ensuring Americans get the help they need during emergencies. But they also affirmed their plan to move more of those responsibilities away from the federal government.

“Disasters are best when they’re managed at the state and local level,” agency officials wrote in an email. “We’re ensuring our role supports decisions that need to happen at the state and local levels.”

Moore said it doesn’t have to be an either/or scenario. The government shouldn’t eliminate or hobble the federal disaster-response infrastructure — but also, states can do more to prepare for and respond to disasters, such as investing in climate resilience and expanding their emergency management capacity.

Rebalancing federal, state and local responsibilities with regards to disaster response and recovery is “a conversation worth having,” he said, but such changes would require

thoughtful cooperation and a slow transition to ensure states have the budgets, staffing and supplies needed to protect the public.

“The result of the administration’s unraveling of the disaster safety net is somebody’s going to pay, and if you want to know who, just go look in the mirror,” Moore said. “It’s going to be individuals that are going to have to basically self-finance their recovery, and mayors and governors that are ... left holding the bag.”

Thousands of people agree with him. A federal review council seeking input on FEMA’s future has racked up more than 11,000 public comments ahead of a Thursday deadline, many in support of the agency.

“FEMA should be kept in place, because we are constantly having disasters strike our nation,” one citizen wrote in the public forum. “People in many places in America are in an economic position that doesn’t allow them to purchase insurance against flooding, wind damage, and or forest fires[.] Please save this great program.”

Hamilton, the former acting director, was fired only one day after he testified about the agency’s importance in Congress — stating, “I do not believe it is in the best interests of the American people to eliminate the Federal Emergency Management Agency.”

The decision to fire Hamilton as hurricane season rapidly approaches is “flabbergasting, even for the Trump administration,” said Carly Fabian, senior policy advocate with nonprofit advocacy organization Public Citizen.

“Dissolving FEMA would leave a void that state governments cannot pretend to fill,” Fabian wrote in a statement. “Over the next few months, disasters will strike the U.S. It is not a question of if — it is simply a question of where these disasters will happen.”

Hamilton’s firing adds him to the ranks of an estimated 2,000 staffers at FEMA who have been laid off or taken a buyout this year — some 30% of its workforce, according to multiple reports. His successor, David Richardson, warned staff not to interfere with upcoming changes and vowed to “find out how to push things down to the states.”

“I, and I alone, speak for FEMA,” Richardson said during an all-hand’s meeting on Friday, according to leaked video footage obtained by CBS News. “I am here to car[illegible]

out President Trump's intent."

Leadership changes are only some of many recent actions the Trump administration has taken to undercut federal emergency response, including the near-total dissolution of Americorps, a program that deploys about 2,000 young volunteers to FEMA and other disaster-relief organizations each year. California and two dozen other states are suing the administration over its cancellation.

The administration also decided to end a FEMA grant program known as Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities, or BRIC, which was designed to help state and local governments reduce their risk of environmental hazards. The estimated loss from terminated BRIC funds awarded under the Biden administration is $882 million, according to a news release from the agency.

"The BRIC program was yet another example of a wasteful and ineffective FEMA program. It was more concerned with political agendas than helping Americans affected by natural disasters," FEMA officials wrote in the release. (Last month, a court ruled that the president's claims of political bias at FEMA were unfounded.)

Not all of FEMA's woes are tied to President Trump, however. This is the third year in a row that the agency is poised to run out of disaster-relief funding before the onset of hurricane season, with FEMA's most recent monthly report projecting that the fund could dry up as soon as July or August. The fund is allocated annually by Congress, and the agency has already spent or committed $42 billion of its $67 billion budget this year, according to the federal spending database.

FEMA has also been subject to criticism from both sides of the aisle, including concerns about mismanagement and inadequate response to disasters under the Biden administration such as Hurricane Helene in 2024 and the wildfire in Maui a year prior. Many lawmakers have been pushing for reform at the agency since at least 2006, when a bipartisan Congressional investigation concluded that FEMA was unprepared for Hurricane Katrina.

Such disasters have only increased in the years since then. A 2024 report from the independent Government Accountability Office found that mounting disasters have "stretched FEMA's workforce in unprecedented ways." The number of disasters the

agency manages at the peak of hurricane season has more than doubled over the last seven years, from 30 in 2016 to 71 in 2023, the report says.

Yet the Trump administration's response to these mounting crises is to simply stop counting them: Federal officials last week announced that NOAA will no longer be updating its database of billion-dollar disasters, outraging environmental groups.

"Billion-dollar disasters won't stop just because we stop tracking them," read a statement from Alex Glass, communications director with the nonprofit group Climate Power. "Trump is trying to hide the true cost of the climate crisis, while American families pay the price."

The president's defanging of FEMA and other climate programs will affect states across the country — including many that voted for him. The administration in recent weeks has denied requests for disaster aid following tornadoes in Arkansas, floods in West Virginia and hurricanes in Georgia and North Carolina.

Maysmith, of the League of Conservation Voters, said it is "unconscionable" for FEMA to walk away from its responsibilities, as it will not only shift the onus of recovery onto states and local governments but also to individuals.

"It means people's lives are harder, because when, through no fault of their own, their house burns or their house floods or their house is swept away or their business is swept away — whatever the disaster might be — their life is going to be irreparably changed in so many ways," Maysmith said. "We can't fix it all, but the thing that they need is for the government to step up and help."

©2025 Los Angeles Times. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

©2025 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. E.REPUBLIC LLC
DO NOT SELL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION | PRIVACY & AI

RECOVERY

What Would Hurricane Season Look Like Without FEMA?

The Trump administration has indicated states should play a bigger role in disaster recovery. As hurricane season approaches, Mississippi communities consider how they would recover without assistance from FEMA.

April 28, 2025 • Anita Lee, The Sun Herald

(TNS) — As hurricane season approaches, South Mississippians are left to wonder how they and their communities would recover with less financial assistance and direction from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

President Trump has indicated states should play a bigger role in disaster recovery. Most recently, Trump denied the state of Arkansas a major disaster declaration to a in recovery from tornadoes and severe storms that hit March 14-15. Gov. Sarah

Huckabee Sanders, a Trump press secretary during his previous administration, has appealed the ruling.

Mississippi awaits a ruling on its own request for a major disaster declaration from the same severe weather system.

Sanders submitted her state's request more than a week ahead of Mississippi's. While multiple factors go into approval for public and individual assistance, the decision is ultimately Trump's.

Moss Point Mayor Billy Knight, a Democrat, lamented what happened with the request from Arkansas. He knows what FEMA assistance means in a disaster.

"Without support from the federal government, these small communities in states like Mississippi and Arkansas do not have the resources to get us back where we were," Knight said.

Tornado recovery in South MS

Moss Point is in one of the 29 Mississippi counties, plus the Choctaw Indian Reservation, that received FEMA assistance to remove debris, and replace public infrastructure and buildings, after a record-breaking 19 tornadoes in June 2023. FEMA says it obligated almost $2.3 million to assist individuals and almost $8.9 million for public emergency and permanent work after a major disaster declaration.

FEMA typically pays 75% of public expenses when a major disaster is declared, with state and local governments picking up the remaining 25%. FEMA reimburses the expenses rather than covering them up front, a process that can be long and cumbersome.

Cash-strapped Moss Point took out a $1 million line of credit to cover debris removal, receiving $578,852 in reimbursements. FEMA paid the majority, with the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency covering 12.5%, Knight said. Moss Point will pay the remaining 12.5

Knight said damage to city buildings is still being assessed. "We haven't gotten a dime for that," he said, noting the city is able to use a damaged recreation building.

The Mississippi localities hit by the most recent round of tornadoes will have to rely on their own resources, the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency, long-term recovery committees and volunteer labor if FEMA assistance isn't forthcoming, a MEMA spokesman said.

The severe weather spawned 18 tornadoes, storms, flooding and straight-line winds, MEMA Executive Director Stephen McCraney said. Seven deaths have been attributed to the storms. Gov. Tate Reeves is seeking individual assistance for 14 counties and public assistance for 17 counties.

Individual assistance could include grants for temporary housing and home repairs, low-interest loans and other programs.

A state disaster trust fund that can be used for recovery costs averages a balance of about $8.5 million, MEMA said.

High cost of hurricane recovery

The cost of recovering from hurricanes can be daunting. For example, the late Republican Sen. Thad Cochran was serving in the powerful position of Senate Appropriations Committee chairman when Hurricane Katrina hit in August 2005.

With the help of then-Gov. Haley Barbour and Mississippi's congressional delegation, Republicans and Democrats alike, Cochran secured $24.6 billion for Mississippi's recovery. The money covered a wide range of programs for local governments and homeowners, and it flowed through more than one agency.

Chip McDermott was an alderman at-large, and then mayor, in hard-hit Pass Christian after the hurricane. The small city lost its main revenue source, a Walmart Supercenter since rebuilt.

He said Pass Christian received at least $100 million in relief funds through FEMA and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

FEMA, he said, "jump-started everything we did."

He added: "Without the American taxpayer and the volunteers who came here, we wouldn't have anything. Nothing."

FEMA drawbacks examined

But there are drawbacks to dealing with FEMA. For public damage, the agency will replace only what existed. Improvements aren't covered. If expenses are not properly documented, reimbursement is denied. The process can be grueling.

"It's their money and their rules and you've got to follow them," McDermott said. "It's complicated, believe me. The FEMA guidelines have got more terminology than an NFL playbook."

Trump issued an executive order Jan. 24 calling for a thorough examination of FEMA. His order said that the agency needs to "drastically improve." He wants an examination of whether FEMA's bureaucracy hinders disaster response.

The order also included his much-cited suggestion that FEMA play a support role to states "rather than supplanting state control of disaster relief."

But McDermott wonders how states could manage disaster relief.

"I don't know if the state's carrying that kind of money," he said. "I doubt seriously that any state would have that kind of money."

© 2025 The Sun Herald (Biloxi, Miss.). Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

©2025 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. E.REPUBLIC LLC
DO NOT SELL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION | PRIVACY & AI