

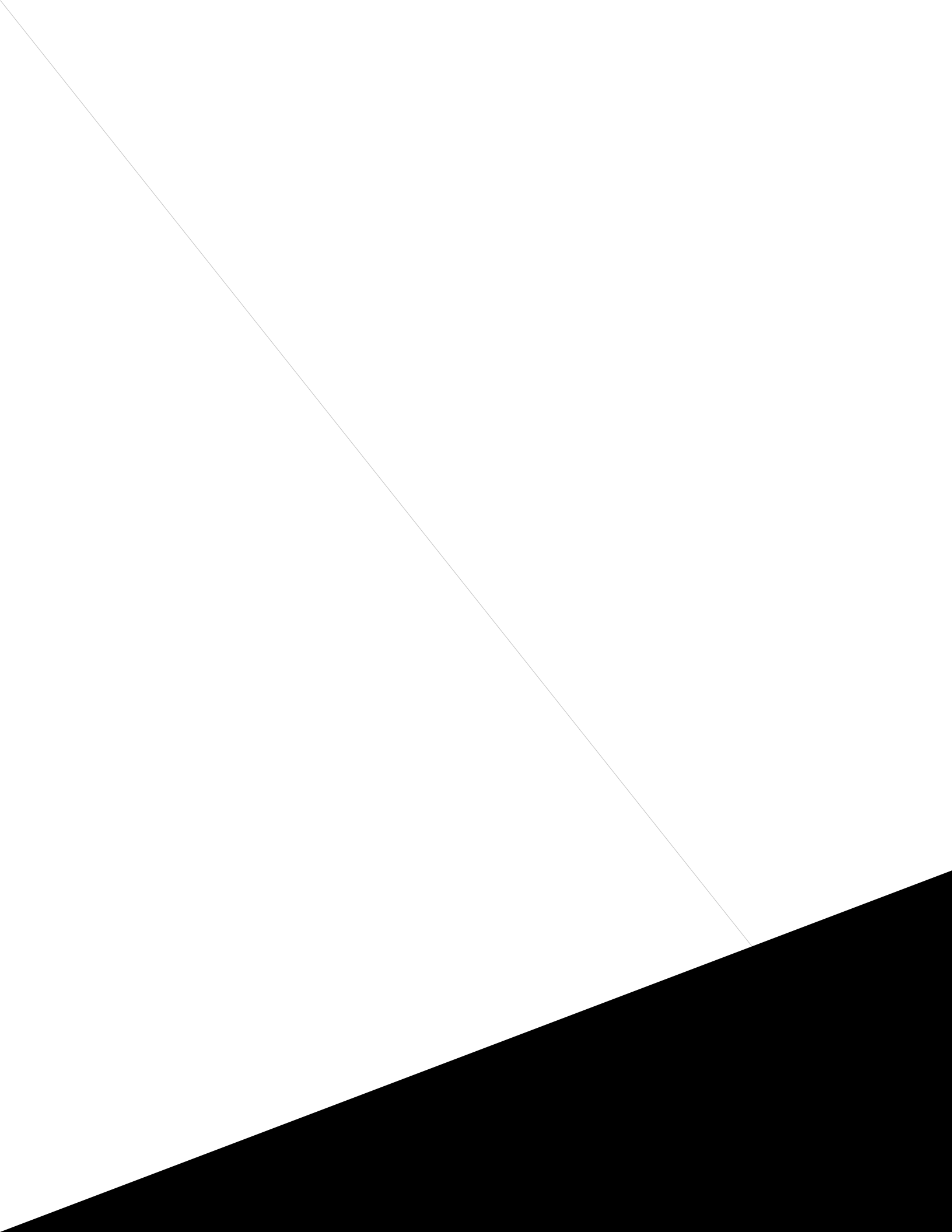


FEMA, DHS, and Katrina: Managing Domestic Catastrophes Better

By

our legitimate outrage over the Katrina disaster. Making changes without prior analysis could easily make matters worse.

The administration (through an internal





Since its creation, FEMA has responded to hundreds of disasters in all 50 states as well as Guam, Puerto Rico, the Pacific Island Trust Territories, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Despite experiencing mediocre results during its first dozen years, especially in respond



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government organizations that help prepare for, prevent, respond to, and recover from domestic disasters. Both federal legislation and executive guidance reflect a belief that other government agencies can make targeted contributions in emergency response areas that represent logical extensions of their regular missions. For example, Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD)-7 of 2003 assigns a range of responsibilities for managing certain types of both natural and man-made (e.g., terrorism) emergencies to non-DHS agencies with specialized response capabilities. For example, FEMA works with the Department of Energy to restore electricity, the Department of Transportation to supply buses to help evacuate victims, the National Guard to provide security, and with the American Red Cross to find emergency housing for evacuees and assist with other mass-care responsibilities.<sup>16</sup>

FEMA does not have the authority to tell other federal agencies what to do, or sufficient budget or staff to manage large emergencies without external assistance. At present, FEMA has only about 2,500 full-time permanent employees and 5,000 “reserve” employees available on standby.<sup>17</sup> It also directly controls just a handful of emergency response assets, such as urban search and rescue teams and warehouses storing stockpiles of commodities and equipment that disaster field offices can use in an emergency. DHS and other federal agencies (especially the Department of Defense and the Department of Health and Human Services) control additional specialized teams of

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<sup>16</sup> “Mass care” involves non-medical services such as providing shelter, food, and emergency first aid. For a description of the broad range of federal agencies assisting with the Katrina response and recovery under FEMA’s coordination see Sam Coates, “Wide Net Was Cast for Aid After Katrina: Leaving Day-to-Day Jobs, Federal Workers Volunteer By the Thousands for Duty,” *Washington Post*, September 22, 2005. Besides the Stafford ActM w TR B pE r d





insurance to property owners in communities that adopt and enforce ordinances to reduce losses from floods. In cooperation with first responders and other stakeholders, FEMA promotes the adoption of universal standards for emergency equipment and procedures, and helps finance training and exercises based on these criteria. It also works to create user-friendly risk and hazard identification products (e.g., easily updatable digital multi-hazard maps). To enhance individual preparedness, FEMA seeks to publicize potential hazards through various community outreach programs, including posting information on [www.Ready.gov](http://www.Ready.gov) and its own website. FEMA managers also coordinate the federal government's interagency

Officer (FCO) to oversee federal and non-federal disaster relief efforts in the areas included in the designation. During Katrina, FEMA deployed FCOs to the state emergency operation centers (EOCs) in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi before landfall. In addition, FEMA headquarters held daily video conferences with state and local managers to assess the situation and improve the response. FEMA liaison teams in the field partnered with state and local emergency managers to establish a unified command structure, based at the EOC, to integrate the federal contribution with state and local efforts. The liaison personnel also assisted federal military forces involved in search-and-rescue efforts, financed the delivery of food and water by private contractors, and supervised the distribution of federal funds to nonprofit disaster relief organizations like the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army that provided emergency shelter and other mass care. The liaison teams also monitored the developing situation and, taking into account the advice of local authorities and first responders, transmitted status reports to FEMA headquarters. Following state EOC validation of local petitions for federal assistance, FEMA representatives passed along the request to agency headquarters in Washington. Finally, FEMA deployed community relations teams to survey the affected localities and inform their residents about available federal assistance programs and how to access them.<sup>20</sup>

After the emergency has peaked, FEMA refocuses its efforts towards assisting the stricken areas to recover from the disaster. In accordance with any congressional guidance incorporated in FEMA's emergency supplemental

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<sup>20</sup> These joint federal-state-local procedures are described in some detail in Michael Brown's testimony before the House Select Bipartisan Committee hearings on the response to Hurricane Katrina, CQ Transcripts, reprinted in "Former FEMA e

appropriations, the agency will provide financial assistance to help stricken residents partially cover uninsured losses and dispose of disaster-related debris.







terrorist incidents. The six capabilities that pertain exclusively to preventing terrorism result from the possibility that, with actionable intelligence, government agencies could prevent a terrorist incident. Unlike natural or accidental disasters, terrorist plots entail advance preparations that often can be detected. The GAO study also found that, while spending on terrorist-oriented first responder grants increased faster than funding for grant programs with an all-hazards focus between fiscal years 2001-2005, the overall expenditures for both types of grants increased substantially during this same period. The authors note, moreover, that most DHS preparedness grants, even if primarily aimed at enhancing state and local responders' capabilities to manage t

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unclear whether the FEMA Director or the DHS Secretary had the role of chief spokesperson for the federal relief effort.

The National Response Plan, which formally took effect in December 2004, provides the framework for determining responsibilities during a domestic emergency. In particular, the NRP and its various Annexes determine which federal agencies and programs are activated, typically under FEMA's coordination role, in various types of incidents or threat conditions. It also specifies how federal agencies coordinate with state, local, and tribal governments and the private sector, and when federal authorities assume control of the national response.<sup>27</sup> DHS anticipates that the NRP will supercede the separate disaster plans developed by each state, U.S. federal agency, and other bodies—defining their roles and responsibilities for

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FEMA into DHS during the immediate aftermath of a domestic emergency—perhaps using procedures similar to those by which the National Guard and the Coast Guard reintegrate into the Department of Defense during wartime.

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) underpins the NRP by promoting an integrated response across all emergency management disciplines and at all levels of the U.S. government—federal, state, local, or tribal—to any type of domestic disaster (“one all-discipline, all-hazards plan”). It sets unified standards for training, terminology, technologies, organizational processes, and operational and reporting procedures for use by government and nongovernmental first responders in all four mission areas of prevention, protection, response, and recovery.

The Agency's FY2003-08 Strategic Plan has established the goal that FEMA "[d]evelop, acquire, and coordinate a national operational capability, and the resources and assets to simultaneously respond to four catastrophic plus twelve non-catastrophic incidents, anywhere in the country."<sup>34</sup> Katrina, which arguably involved a pair of back-to-back catastrophes (a far-reaching and very destructive hurricane followed by the flooding of a major urban area), indicates that the agency has a long way to go to achieve this capacity. For example, the emergency highlighted two persistent types of communications problems. First, many federal, state, and local first responders active in the New Orleans area still used outdated equipment that proved incapable of communicating with one another. Second, the hurricane and subsequent flood devastated much of the local communications infrastructure. Not only did the resulting lack of situational awareness initially mask the extent of the disaster to outsiders (including DHS headquarters in Washington and the military commanders and private relief organizations deployed closer to the site), it also deprived them of the common operating picture they needed to coordinate their response most effectively. Neither the interoperability nor the resiliency problem can be easily solved since they both result from longstanding resource limitations and a national policy of relying primarily on state, local, and private actors to provide and regulate non-military communications.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency,

(Washington, D.C., 2002), p. 11, at

[http://www.fema.gov/pdf/library/in\\_brief-fema\\_strat\\_plan\\_fy03-08.pdf](http://www.fema.gov/pdf/library/in_brief-fema_strat_plan_fy03-08.pdf) see also p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> For more on the communications interoperability problem see Siobhan Gorman and Tom Bowman, "Disaster Workers Left Out in Silence: Better Communications Equipment Years Away," September 19, 2005 and 9/11 Public Discourse Project, "Kean-Hamilton Statement on Release of 9/11 Public Discourse Project Report on Implementation of Recommendations," September 14, 2005, p. 2, at <http://www.9-11pdp.org>. Kevin Martin, the Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, has called for developing a deployable satellite-based system that could be used by the first responders in a disaster area lacking functioning land-based communications infrastructure see Arshad Mohammed and Yuki Woguchi, "Crisis Communications Network Criticized: es

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assisting with domestic emergency preparedness and response. Only a close examination will determine the net effect of these transfers, and which personnel policies should be changed.

Some critics also argue that FEMA's response to Katrina suffered from poor and inexperienced leadership. Whatever the accuracy of the concernM

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response in recent years, manifested by the increasing congressional appropriations for the DRF, might have inadvertently given local authorities an additional incentive to prematurely declare that they have exhausted their resources in order to trigger large-scale federal intervention and funds.

One issue warranting renewed attention in light of Katrina is the department's long-delayed plan to create a unified regional structure to govern how it interacts with state and local officials and members t

Katrina should serve as a stimulus for reassessing U.S. response policies and capabilities for catastrophic emergencies. Nevertheless, analysis must precede decision. The administration, Congress, and nongovernmental experts should review in detail the policies, decisions, and organizations that might have contributed to the poor management of the disaster. To avoid faulty generalizations, however, they should also examine more successful responses, such as to hur