

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-108216](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Natural disasters have become costlier and more frequent. In 2024, there were 27 disasters with at least \$1 billion in damages, compared to 14 in 2018. Disasters in 2024 resulted in 568 deaths nationwide.

Further, federal disaster declarations and the expectation for federal support have increased. In addition, federal support for disaster recovery can last for years. For example, FEMA is managing over 600 open major disaster declarations—some of which occurred almost 20 years ago, according to the agency.

This statement discusses GAO's new disaster high-risk area, and related work on reducing fragmentation of the federal approach to disaster assistance, among other things.

This statement is based on products GAO issued from May 2020 through February 2025. For this work, GAO analyzed federal law and documents related to disaster assistance and interviewed officials across relevant federal, state and local agencies. GAO also conducted site visits to recent disasters areas, among other actions.

What GAO Recommends

As of March 2025, GAO has approximately 60 open recommendations related to disaster assistance. There are also four matters for congressional consideration. These recommendations and matters are designed to address the various challenges discussed in this statement. Agencies have taken steps to address some of these recommendations. GAO will continue to monitor agency efforts to determine if they fully address the challenges GAO has identified.

For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or CurrieC@gao.gov.

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DISASTER ASSISTANCE

Improving the Federal Approach

What GAO Found

There is a growing emphasis on how the federal government can improve its approach to disaster recovery. In the last 10 years, appropriations for disaster assistance totaled at least \$448 billion, plus an additional \$110 billion in supplemental appropriations so far in fiscal year 2025. Recent disasters such as Hurricanes Helene and Milton, the wildfires in California, and this month's destructive tornadoes across the Midwest and South demonstrated the need for government-wide action to deliver assistance efficiently and effectively and reduce its fiscal exposure (see figure). Given the rise in the number and cost of disasters and increasing challenges related to the delivery of federal disaster assistance identified in GAO's work, *Improving the Delivery of Federal Disaster Assistance* was added to GAO's High-Risk List in February 2025.

To improve the federal government's delivery of disaster assistance, GAO has found that attention is needed to improve processes for assisting survivors, reduce fragmentation across federal disaster assistance programs, strengthen the disaster workforce and capacity, and invest in resilience. For example, GAO has recommended that Congress should consider establishing an independent commission to recommend reforms to the federal approach to disaster recovery, which is fragmented across more than 30 federal entities. GAO also reported on various options for reforming the federal approach to disaster recovery, such as better coordinating and consolidating programs across agencies and simplifying processes for survivors, among other things.

Examples of 2024 and 2025 Disaster Damage



Road repair following Hurricane Helene, North Carolina



Fire damage following the Palisades Fire, Los Angeles, California

Source: GAO. | [GAO-25-108216](#)

Further, GAO recommended that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) develop and implement a methodology that provides a more comprehensive assessment of a jurisdiction's ability to respond to a disaster without federal assistance. Without an accurate assessment, FEMA runs the risk of recommending to the President that federal disaster assistance be awarded to jurisdictions that may not need it. FEMA has taken past steps to do this but has not fully implemented this recommendation. GAO also found that FEMA's workforce is overwhelmed by the increasing number of disasters and other emergencies. Strengthening the disaster workforce will be a critical part of better delivering the assistance that communities and survivors need to recover.