

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-183T](#), 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

Recent hurricanes, wildfires, and flooding have highlighted the challenges the federal government faces in responding effectively to natural disasters. The 2017 and 2018 hurricanes and wildfires affected millions of individuals and caused billions of dollars in damages. In March 2019, the Midwest experienced historic flooding that affected millions of acres of agriculture and damaged infrastructure. Since 2005, federal funding for disaster assistance is at least \$450 billion. Increasing reliance on federal help to address natural disasters is a key source of federal fiscal exposure, particularly as certain extreme weather events become more frequent and intense.

This statement discusses, among other things, FEMA's and other federal agencies' progress and challenges related to disaster resilience, recovery programs, and workforce management. This statement is based on GAO reports issued from September 2012 through October 2019, and also includes preliminary observations from ongoing GAO reviews. GAO examined federal laws and documents; interviewed agency officials; and visited disaster damaged areas in California, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, Texas, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, where GAO also interviewed federal and local officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO has made numerous recommendations in prior reports designed to address the challenges discussed in this statement. Federal agencies have taken steps to address these recommendations and GAO is monitoring agencies' ongoing efforts.

View [GAO-20-183T](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or [currie@gao.gov](mailto:currie@gao.gov).

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## DISASTER RECOVERY

### Recent Disasters Highlight Progress and Challenges

#### What GAO Found

GAO's issued and ongoing work has identified progress and challenges in the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) and other federal agencies' disaster recovery efforts, as discussed below.

**Disaster resilience.** GAO found that federal and local efforts to improve resilience can reduce the effects and costs of future disasters. FEMA has made progress in this area, but in November 2017, GAO found that more consistent planning could help ensure that rebuilding efforts incorporate hazard mitigation, which would increase the resilience of infrastructure during future disasters. GAO recommended that FEMA take steps to consistently integrate hazard mitigation into its recovery process. FEMA is working to address these recommendations.

Aerial Photo of Wildfire Damage, Santa Rosa, California, October 11, 2017



Source: Department of Defense. | GAO-20-183T

**Managing long-term recovery.** GAO's work has shown that federal recovery programs are complicated and can be slow to provide assistance. For example, in October 2019, GAO reported that local officials described onerous documentation requirements in FEMA's Public Assistance program and the unique challenge of removing debris following the 2017 wildfires. GAO recommended that FEMA assess its operations to identify actions to enhance future recovery from severe wildfires. In March 2019, GAO reported that the ad hoc nature of disaster recovery block grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development delayed the availability of funding. GAO recommended, among other things, that Congress consider permanently authorizing this grant program to meet the needs of disaster survivors in a timely manner.

**FEMA workforce management.** GAO has previously reported on long-standing workforce management challenges, such as ensuring an adequately-staffed and trained workforce to provide effective assistance. For example, GAO reported in September 2018 that the 2017 disasters overwhelmed FEMA's workforce and a lack of trained staff with program expertise led to complications in its response efforts, particularly after Hurricane Maria. While FEMA has taken actions to address several of GAO's workforce management-related recommendations since 2016, a number of recommendations have not yet been implemented. GAO is currently reviewing FEMA's workforce management efforts and lessons learned from the 2017 disasters and will report its findings early next year.