Disaster Assistance
How much does it actually cost the federal government?

AN OVERVIEW OF GAO-16-797

What does disaster assistance spending look like?

The federal government spent at least $277.6 billion during fiscal years 2005 through 2014 for disaster assistance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Type</th>
<th>Total Obligations During Fiscal Years 2005 Through 2014 (Dollars in Thousands)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disaster Relief Fund</td>
<td>$104.5 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disaster-Specific Programs and Activities</td>
<td>$132.2 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disaster-Applicable Programs and Activities</td>
<td>$40.9 billion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our report contains a detailed look at each agency's disaster assistance obligations and expenditures.

Which disasters receive assistance?

The federal government provides assistance before and after disasters to mitigate their impact and when the damage is severe and extensive enough to warrant it.

- Stafford Act Disasters: Presidentially-declared major disaster or emergency
- Non-Stafford Act Disasters: did not receive a Stafford Act declaration

Some examples:
- Disease or pandemic outbreaks, such as H1N1 "swine flu" (2009)
- Droughts in California and Oregon (2014-15)
- Financial Non-Financial
- Wildfires in Colorado and Oklahoma (2011-13)
- Surge of unaccompanied migrant children along the Southwest border (2014)
- Hurricanes Katrina (2005) and Sandy (2012)
- Ammonium nitrate explosion in McLean County, Texas (2013)
- Deepwater Horizon oil spill (2010)

What type of assistance?

We examined federal programs and activities that mitigate (including pre-disaster), respond to, and recover from disasters.

These activities include:

- Financial
  - grants
  - loans
  - insurance programs
- Non-Financial
  - technical assistance
  - public health
  - environmental cleanup

We divided the assistance into three categories:

- Disaster-Specific Programs
- Disaster-Applicable Programs
- Disaster Assistance

FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund (DRF)

The primary source of federal disaster recovery assistance, used for Stafford Act disasters.

- This "rainy day fund" allows FEMA to fund disaster assistance in many ways when a disaster is declared.
- Through one method, called Mission Assignments, FEMA assigns disaster recovery duties to other agencies, and can use funds from DRF to reimburse them.
- Mission Assignment Example: Assigned Department: Department of Defense (DOD) Programs: FEMA assigns DOD agencies various duties in response to a Stafford Act declaration, including emergency route clearance, air space control, and deployable temporary medical facilities.

Disaster-Specific Programs

Specifically authorized for disaster assistance purposes

Example:
- Department: Department of Housing and Urban Development
  - Program: Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery Program
  - Purpose: Provides grants to help cities, counties, parishes, and states recover from presidentially declared disasters.

Not specifically designated for disaster or emergency situations

Example:
- Department: Department of Health and Human Services
  - Program: National Bioterrorism Hospital Preparedness Program
  - Purpose: Provides funding to public health departments in states and cities to save lives during emergencies that exceed day-to-day capacity of the health and emergency response systems.