United States Government Accountability Office

Puerto Rico Electricity Grid Recovery

Better Information and Enhanced Coordination Is Needed to Address Challenges

What GAO Found

Federal agencies can support long-term electricity grid recovery efforts in Puerto Rico through three primary roles—providing funding and technical assistance and coordinating among local and federal agencies. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) are the primary federal funding sources for grid recovery. The Department of Energy (DOE) can provide technical assistance to local and federal entities to support grid recovery efforts. In addition, FEMA is to coordinate federal capabilities to support and expedite recovery.

As of July 2019, neither FEMA nor HUD had funded long-term grid recovery projects in Puerto Rico, but DOE had provided technical assistance. Progress on grid recovery efforts has been hindered in part because FEMA has not provided clear written information on what will be eligible for funding. For example, FEMA has new authorities to fund projects that enhance resilience and restore grid infrastructure to the latest industry standards, but FEMA has not defined resilience or specified what standards it will accept. Consequently, it is unclear which technologies and approaches are eligible for funding. According to FEMA, developing a policy to implement its new authorities created challenges for establishing clear guidance but FEMA officials believed they had reached an understanding with local entities through discussions and trainings. However, without clarification from FEMA, local entities do not have sufficient information to implement plans and risk spending resources developing projects that may not be eligible for funding. Also, the need for coordination among the numerous entities involved in grid recovery in Puerto Rico poses challenges, according to local and federal officials. FEMA is to lead the coordination of federal support for local agencies to achieve recovery goals, but has not established a mechanism that is working to facilitate coordination among the numerous entities involved in grid recovery. According to FEMA, coordination across federal leadership is occurring and agencies communicate directly with local entities. However, these efforts do not involve all federal and local entities and, given the unique situation, without a mechanism to enhance coordination among these entities, coordination challenges may continue to hinder progress.