HIGHWAY EMERGENCY RELIEF

Federal Highway Administration Should Enhance Accountability over Project Decisions

What GAO Found

GAO found that the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) did not document the bases for decisions to classify projects as emergency repairs in 22 of the 25 project files reviewed. Without such documentation, it is not possible to definitively determine the justification for these decisions; GAO identified at least three projects that may have been inappropriately classified. For example, FHWA classified a $10.7 million ferry project in Lynchburg, Texas as an emergency repair to restore essential traffic. Several highways, however, were available immediately following the disaster that service the same locations and result in faster travel times than the ferry. FHWA guidance does not require officials to document decisions to classify projects as emergency repairs or clearly define what constitutes restoration of essential traffic. Designating projects as emergency repairs can increase the federal fiscal exposure in disasters. Had FHWA classified the ferry project as a permanent repair—instead of an emergency repair—the state would have been responsible for paying approximately $2.1 million in matching funds.

Travel Times Using The Lynchburg Ferry and Alternative Routes

Traveling by ferry takes about 40 minutes
Traveling by highway takes about 20 minutes (up to 45 minutes during rush hour from 4:30 to 6pm)

GAO also identified two temporary bridge projects in Puerto Rico classified as emergency repairs even though (1) work did not start within 180 days of a disaster, as generally required; (2) the bridges are not to be completed until late 2019 and early 2020; and (3) both are to be replaced by permanent bridges within a couple of years. Out of approximately 1,200 eligible projects in Puerto Rico, FHWA officials reported undertaking 34, including the two bridges GAO identified, after 180 days. Officials also stated they did not document the basis for continuing to classify these projects as emergency repairs. FHWA officials in Puerto Rico stated they were not required to complete repairs within the 180 day limit established in law because Congress exempted Puerto Rico from federal matching share requirements. Further, emergency repair projects are allowed to expedite contracting and environmental procedures. After GAO raised this issue with FHWA, the agency stated that emergency repair projects are only permitted to use these expedited procedures within the first 180 days. While officials stated they plan to update guidance to include this policy, there is no specific timeline for doing so.