

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-13-763](#), a report to Congressional Requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

The United States continues to face an uncertain and complicated security environment, as major disasters and emergencies, such as the Boston Marathon bombings and Hurricane Sandy illustrate. DOD supports civil authorities' response to domestic incidents through an array of activities collectively termed civil support. In July 2012, DOD began to plan for federal military support during a complex catastrophe—such as a large earthquake that causes extraordinary levels of casualties or damage, and cascading failures of critical infrastructure. GAO was asked to assess DOD's planning and capabilities for a complex catastrophe. This report assesses the extent to which DOD has (1) planned for and identified capabilities to respond to complex catastrophes, and (2) established a command and control construct for complex catastrophes and other multistate incidents. To do so, GAO analyzed civil support plans, guidance, and other documents, and interviewed DOD and FEMA officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that combatant commands (1) work through the defense coordinating officers to develop an interim set of specific DOD capabilities that could be provided to prepare for and respond to complex catastrophes, as FEMA completes its five-year regional planning cycle; and (2) develop, clearly define, communicate, and implement a construct for the command and control of federal military forces during multistate civil support incidents such as complex catastrophes. DOD concurred with both recommendations.

View [GAO-13-763](#). For more information, contact Brian Lepore at (202) 512-4523 or [leporeb@gao.gov](mailto:leporeb@gao.gov).

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## CIVIL SUPPORT

### Actions Are Needed to Improve DOD's Planning for a Complex Catastrophe

## What GAO Found

U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) and U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) are updating their existing civil support plans to include a complex catastrophe scenario, as directed by the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff. However, the commands are delaying the identification of capabilities that could be provided to execute the plans until the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the lead federal response agency, completes its regional planning efforts in 2018. NORTHCOM officials told us that the command's civil support plan would describe some general force requirements, such as types of military units, but that it will not identify specific capabilities that could be provided to civil authorities during a complex catastrophe. Similarly, according to PACOM officials, PACOM's plan also will not identify such capabilities. Still, defense coordinating officers—senior military officers who work closely with federal, state, and local officials in FEMA's regional offices—have taken some initial steps to coordinate with FEMA during its regional planning process to identify capabilities that the Department of Defense (DOD) may be required to provide in some regions. For example, a defense coordinating officer has helped one of the FEMA regions that has completed its regional plan to develop bundled mission assignments that pre-identify a group of capabilities that region will require during a complex catastrophe. DOD doctrine states that the department should interact with non-DOD agencies to gain a mutual understanding of their response capabilities and limitations. By working through the defense coordinating officers to identify an interim set of specific capabilities for a complex catastrophe—instead of waiting for FEMA to complete its five-year regional planning process—NORTHCOM and PACOM can enhance their preparedness and mitigate the risk of an unexpected capability gap during the five-year period until FEMA completes its regional plans in 2018.

DOD has established a command and control framework for a federal military civil support response; however, the command and control structure for federal military forces during complex catastrophes is unclear because DOD has not developed a construct prescribing the roles, responsibilities, and relationships among command elements that may be involved in responding to such incidents across multiple states. This gap in the civil support framework was illustrated by recent events such as National Level Exercise 2011—which examined DOD's response to a complex catastrophe—and the federal military response to Hurricane Sandy in 2012. For example, officials from NORTHCOM's Army component told us that the exercise revealed that the absence of an operational-level command element created challenges for NORTHCOM in managing the operations of federal military forces during a large-scale, multistate incident. Similarly, DOD after action reports on Hurricane Sandy found that the command and control structure for federal military forces was not clearly defined, resulting in the degradation of situational awareness and unity of effort, and the execution of missions without proper approval. DOD doctrine states that operational plans should identify the command structure expected to exist during their implementation. By identifying roles, responsibilities, and command relationships during multistate incidents such as complex catastrophes, DOD will be better positioned to manage and allocate resources across a multistate area and ensure effective and organized response operations.