2018 PACIFIC DISASTERS

Preliminary Observations on FEMA’s Disaster Response and Recovery Efforts

What GAO Found

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) obligated about $788 million in disaster assistance, as of May 2020, to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Guam, and Hawaii for response and recovery efforts following the 2018 disasters—most of which went to the CNMI. About $541 million (69 percent) of these obligations went to recovery projects in the CNMI, Guam, and Hawaii, such as debris removal and bridge and utility repair. FEMA estimates it will obligate an additional $94 million in grants to be provided directly to the CNMI and Hawaii through September 2020.

Local officials GAO spoke with considered FEMA’s response to the 2018 Pacific disasters to be generally effective, but it is not clear if FEMA’s response procedures are well-suited for slow-moving disasters, such as volcanic eruptions. Specifically, FEMA reported taking steps prior to 2018 to improve its response capabilities in the region, such as completing catastrophic disaster plans with the CNMI and Guam and increasing the capacity of its two Pacific area distribution supply centers. Officials also told GAO that FEMA was an effective partner that led a unified, coordinated response effort. However, FEMA procedures may not be well-suited for slow-moving disasters, such as a volcanic eruption in Hawaii, which, according to Hawaii officials, resulted in FEMA starting recovery efforts before response activities were completed.

GAO’s preliminary analysis identified several challenges affecting FEMA’s recovery efforts in the CNMI, Guam, and Hawaii. Specifically, CNMI and Hawaii officials noted that disagreements with FEMA over the accuracy of estimates for certain fixed-cost recovery projects have delayed these projects. According to CNMI and Hawaii officials, these disagreements were caused, in part, by FEMA not accounting for higher procurement and shipping costs to the Pacific region. In addition, similar to disaster recoveries in other U.S. island territories, limited disaster workforce capacity and shortages of construction workers hindered the implementation of FEMA-funded projects in the Pacific. Lastly, contracting and construction challenges contributed to delays in the CNMI’s implementation of FEMA’s Permanent Housing Construction program.