

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-140](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The rising number of natural disasters and increasing reliance on federal assistance are key sources of federal fiscal exposure. FEMA has four grant programs to increase disaster resilience through hazard mitigation projects.

The Additional Supplemental Appropriations for Disaster Relief Act, 2019, included a provision for GAO to review the federal response to disasters in 2018. This report addresses 1) FEMA's use of grants to support hazard mitigation; 2) challenges reported by selected jurisdictions applying for grants; and 3) how FEMA has assessed the effects of its hazard mitigation projects and shared the results.

GAO analyzed FEMA's grant data for fiscal years 2010 through 2018 to capture the most complete recent data, conducted nongeneralizable site visits with 12 state and local jurisdictions selected to capture a range of grant funding levels and hazards, reviewed FEMA grant documents, and interviewed FEMA mitigation officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations, including that FEMA develop a plan to assess and streamline its hazard mitigation grant programs, create a centralized inventory of related resources, develop a plan to conduct more loss avoidance studies, and share state studies on hazard mitigation effectiveness. The Department of Homeland Security concurred with our recommendations.

View [GAO-21-140](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or CurrieC@gao.gov

February 2021

DISASTER RESILIENCE

FEMA Should Take Additional Steps to Streamline Hazard Mitigation Grants and Assess Program Effects

What GAO Found

From fiscal years 2010 through 2018, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) obligated over \$11 billion through four grant programs that fund state and local hazard mitigation efforts. FEMA awarded about 88 percent of this amount through the two grant programs that fund hazard mitigation post-disaster.

State and local officials from selected jurisdictions reported challenges with FEMA's hazard mitigation grant programs. Specifically, officials GAO interviewed from 10 of the 12 jurisdictions said grant application processes were complex and lengthy. To address this, FEMA officials augmented guidance and began monitoring application review time frames for one program and said they intend to assess two other programs to identify opportunities to streamline. However, they did not have a documented plan for doing so. By developing and implementing a plan to identify ways to streamline applications and reviews for all four programs, FEMA could reduce barriers to investments in hazard mitigation. Officials from eight of the 12 jurisdictions also cited challenges with applicants' technical capacity to successfully apply for grants. To address this, FEMA developed training and guidance, but GAO found that these resources are listed on different parts of its website and can be difficult for state and local officials to locate. Creating a centralized inventory of resources could improve applicant capacity to successfully develop mitigation projects and apply for grants.

Examples of Hazard Mitigation Projects



Culvert with a protective headwall that prevents erosion and allows water to pass under a road



Watertight enclosure to prevent floodwater damage



Structure elevation to mitigate flood damage

Source: GAO. | [GAO-21-140](#)

FEMA has assessed some effects of grant-funded hazard mitigation projects, but could expand efforts and better share results. FEMA uses benefit-cost analysis, which estimates the benefits over the life of a project, and post-disaster loss avoidance studies, which estimate project benefits from actual hazard events, to assess project effects. However, the loss avoidance studies have been limited to hurricanes, floods, and tornados, and have not assessed wildfires, winter storms, or other disasters. FEMA officials stated that they would like to expand these studies but do not have specific plans to do so. In addition, FEMA requires some states to assess the effectiveness of their mitigation projects, but does not share these studies. Developing a plan to conduct loss avoidance studies for other hazards and sharing the state studies could help FEMA and stakeholders make better informed mitigation investment decisions.