Why GAO Did This Study

Flooding is the costliest natural disaster in the U.S. Through grant programs that support local hazard mitigation projects, FEMA provides funding for communities to acquire and demolish flood-prone properties from willing owners. From 1989 to 2018, FEMA awarded about $4 billion to acquire about 46,000 properties.

GAO was asked to review FEMA’s property acquisition efforts. This report examines (1) benefits and challenges of property acquisition and FEMA’s efforts to improve acquisitions, and (2) options for improving FEMA property acquisitions, among other objectives.

GAO reviewed literature and FEMA documentation and interviewed FEMA officials. GAO also conducted 30 interviews with stakeholders, including representatives of state and local jurisdictions (selected to capture a range of acquisition funding levels and local conditions), acquisition programs that interviewees or literature identified as successful, organizations with relevant expertise, and researchers.

What GAO Recommends

Congress should consider providing FEMA direction or authority to implement one or more options to address property acquisition challenges. GAO is also making four recommendations to FEMA, including that it evaluate the options and determine whether to pursue implementation of any of them. The Department of Homeland Security agreed with the recommendations.