



U.S. Government
Accountability Office

Disaster Assistance High-Risk Series: Federal Response Workforce Readiness

GAO-25-108598

Report to Congressional Addressees

September 2, 2025



Why This Matters

In recent years, natural disasters have become more frequent, increasing costs and requiring higher levels of federal support. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the number of disasters costing more than \$1 billion in total economic damages in the U.S. nearly doubled between 2018 and 2024—from 14 to 27. Recent disasters further demonstrate the need for government-wide action to deliver assistance efficiently and effectively and reduce the federal government’s fiscal exposure. As such, we added *Improving the Delivery of Federal Disaster Assistance* to our High-Risk List in February 2025.¹

Recent disasters, such as Hurricanes Helene and Milton, which affected the southeast less than 2 weeks apart in 2024, as well as federal workforce reductions and challenges highlight concerns over federal disaster workforce readiness. More recently, flash flooding in Texas killed more than 130 people over the 2025 July 4 weekend; reporting indicated a summer’s worth of rain fell across the region in a matter of hours. As we have previously reported, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—the lead agency for federal disaster response—has long-standing workforce management issues that make supporting response and recovery difficult.² For example, following Helene and Milton, only 4 percent of FEMA’s incident management workforce—the agency’s primary field support for disasters—was available to deploy as of November 1, 2024.

We were asked to review long-standing challenges and emerging issues in federal response efforts for recent disasters, including Hurricanes Helene and

¹GAO, *High-Risk Series: Heightened Attention Could Save Billions More and Improve Government Efficiency and Effectiveness*, [GAO-25-107743](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 25, 2025).

²6 U.S.C. § 313 (providing that FEMA is to lead the nation’s efforts to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate against the risk of natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and other man-made disasters, including catastrophic incidents). GAO, *FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Improve Hiring Data and Address Staffing Gaps*, [GAO-23-105663](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2, 2023); *FEMA Workforce: Long-Standing and New Challenges Could Affect Mission Success*, [GAO-22-105631](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 20, 2022). We have made recommendations over the years to improve FEMA’s workforce management issues, which the agency has addressed, but challenges remain.

Milton and the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires.³ This report, the first in a series, provides information on the support selected federal agencies provided, workforce challenges that arose during recent disaster response efforts, and recent workforce changes and implications for future disasters.

Key Takeaways

Recent disasters, including Hurricanes Helene and Milton and the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, highlight key challenges for the federal disaster response workforce. Additionally, changes to the workforce, including staff reductions, could pose additional challenges for future disasters.

- Within the first 3 months of each of these disasters, FEMA's reported obligations exceeded \$11 billion in total assistance across all three events. FEMA, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), as well as other federal agencies, deployed thousands of personnel to respond.
- The concurrent nature of these disasters, limited disaster workforce capacity, and undertrained surge responders posed challenges to federal agencies responding to these disasters.
- Recent workforce reductions may exacerbate existing workforce challenges and impact federal agencies' capacity to respond to future high-impact disasters. For example, between January 1 and June 1, 2025, the number of active FEMA employees decreased from about 25,800 to 23,350, according to agency data. This includes employees who separated for any reason, such as the 1,465 employees who participated in a voluntary workforce reduction program.

Overview of Recent Disasters

Hurricanes Helene and Milton and the 2025 Los Angeles Wildfires Caused Devastation to Local Communities

Hurricanes Helene and Milton. Helene and Milton made landfall in the U.S. in late September and early October 2024, respectively, directly impacting multiple states. Helene made landfall in Florida as a category 4 hurricane on September 26. As shown in figure 1, the storm included catastrophic inland flooding, extreme winds, a deadly storm surge, and numerous tornadoes that devastated portions of the southeastern U.S. and southern Appalachians.⁴ The President approved major disaster declarations in eight states for Helene—Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

³GAO conducted this review in response to the American Relief Act, 2025, and requests from Congressional members. The American Relief Act, 2025, included a provision for GAO to conduct audits and investigations related to Hurricanes Helene and Milton, and other disasters declared pursuant to the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act) in calendar years 2023 and 2024. Pub. L. No. 118-158, 138 Stat. 1723, 1754 (2024).

⁴Hagen, Andrew et al, National Hurricane Center, *Hurricane Helene*, (April 8, 2025).

Figure 1: Satellite Imagery of Bat Cave, North Carolina Before and After Hurricane Helene



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. | GAO-25-108598

Less than 2 weeks later, Hurricane Milton made landfall in Florida as a category 3 hurricane on October 9, 2024. Milton also caused a significant tornado outbreak over southern and central Florida.⁵ The hurricane's damage was concentrated in Florida and the President approved major disaster declarations for Florida and the Seminole Tribe of Florida. Together, these two disasters resulted in over 290 deaths, directly or indirectly, according to the National Hurricane Center.

2025 Los Angeles wildfires. Starting January 7, 2025, a series of catastrophic wildfires developed in Los Angeles County, California. The wildfires killed more than two dozen people, destroyed more than 15,000 homes and businesses and created unhealthy air quality for millions of people.⁶ Figure 2 shows satellite imagery in the city of Altadena in Los Angeles County before and after the 2025 wildfires. The wildfires were unprecedented in their size, scope, and the damage they caused. On January 8, the President approved a major disaster declaration for the wildfires.

Figure 2: Satellite Imagery of Altadena, California Before and After 2025 Los Angeles Wildfires



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. | GAO-25-108598

Federal Role in Disaster Response

FEMA and Other Federal Agencies Have Roles Under the National Response Framework

Disaster response can involve federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial governments as well as private sector and nongovernmental entities. The

⁵Beven, John et al., National Hurricane Center, *Hurricane Milton*, (March 31, 2025).

⁶Lindsey, Rebecca, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, *The Weather and Climate Influences on the January 2025 Fires Around Los Angeles*, (Feb. 19, 2025).

National Response Framework describes the responsibilities of these entities and guides response activities.⁷ For example, responsibility for responding to a disaster generally begins at the local level, and state, tribal, and territorial governments supplement as necessary.⁸ When an incident occurs that exceeds or is anticipated to exceed their capabilities, the federal government may provide assistance. The *National Response Framework* provides a coordinating structure for federal interagency support and certain federal agencies have primary responsibilities for core response areas, known as emergency support functions.⁹

The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act) authorizes the President to provide financial and other assistance in response to a disaster. Under the Stafford Act, the President may declare a major disaster in response to a request by the governor of a state or territory or the chief executive of a tribal government.¹⁰ The request is to be based on a finding that the disaster is of such severity and magnitude that effective response and recovery are beyond state and local capabilities and that federal assistance is necessary. When a major disaster is declared, FEMA—within the Department of Homeland Security—is the lead agency for coordinating response efforts. One way FEMA coordinates disaster response is through mission assignments. These are work orders it issues to other federal agencies, such as those with emergency support function responsibilities, to use their authorities and resources in support of direct assistance to state and local governments. Agencies may have primary responsibility for certain emergency support functions and serve as support agencies for other emergency support functions. For example,

- USACE coordinates and is the primary agency for the Public Works and Engineering emergency support function, which includes debris removal and emergency repair of damaged public infrastructure. For Hurricane Helene, for example, USACE's mission assignments included establishing temporary emergency power, debris removal, and water system assessments and emergency repairs.
- EPA coordinates and is a primary agency for the Oil and Hazardous Materials Response emergency support function, which includes household hazardous materials removal. EPA is also a support agency for the emergency support function focusing on the drinking water and wastewater systems sector and conducts sampling and analysis of contaminated water. Following the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, for example, EPA cleared hazardous materials from over 9,000 properties and disposed of more than 500 tons of lithium-ion battery material, according to officials.

⁷Department of Homeland Security, *National Response Framework*, 4th ed. (Oct. 28, 2019).

⁸For the purposes of this report, we refer to state, local, tribal, and territorial governments collectively as “state and local governments.”

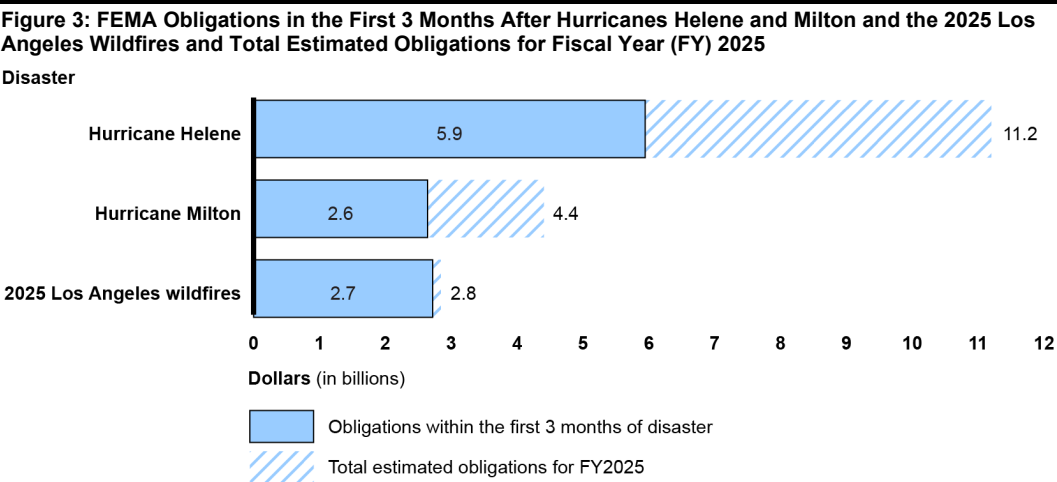
⁹The *National Response Framework* includes 15 emergency support functions—transportation; communications; public works and engineering; firefighting; information and planning; mass care, emergency assistance, temporary housing, and human services; logistics; public health and medical services; search and rescue; oil and hazardous materials response; agriculture and natural resources; energy; public safety and security; cross-sector business and infrastructure; and external affairs.

¹⁰42 U.S.C. § 5171. The President can also declare an emergency, which authorizes more limited types of assistance. 42 U.S.C. § 5190.

FEMA and Other Federal Agency Support for Recent Disasters

In response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton and the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, FEMA and other federal agencies—including USACE and EPA—provided support across nine states and the Seminole Tribe of Florida. This included federal financial assistance, deployed staff, and other life-saving resources.

FEMA’s reported obligations within the first 3 months of each of these disasters exceeded \$11 billion in total assistance from the Disaster Relief Fund (see fig. 3).¹¹ The Disaster Relief Fund is the primary source of federal disaster assistance and funds eligible response and recovery efforts associated with major disaster and emergency declarations. This can include direct and financial assistance for state, local, tribal, and territorial governments—as well as individuals and households.¹²



Source: GAO summary of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) data. | GAO-25-108598

Note: FEMA reported prior obligations and the agency’s estimated FY2025 obligations for these disasters in its report on the Disaster Relief Fund as of July 31, 2025. The Disaster Relief Fund is the primary source of federal disaster assistance and funds eligible response and recovery efforts associated with major disaster and emergency declarations. This includes disaster assistance for state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, as well as individuals and households. FEMA will likely continue to obligate funds for recovery from these disasters for years, based on recovery timeframes for previous disasters.

Hurricanes Helene and Milton. Multiple federal agencies deployed personnel in response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton, and FEMA provided significant financial assistance to support response efforts. FEMA officials stated the agency reached the highest level of deployed staff in agency history in response to these hurricanes.

¹¹FEMA will likely continue to make obligations for recovery from these disasters for years, based on recovery timeframes for previous disasters. For example, according to the July 2025 Disaster Relief Fund report, FEMA estimates obligating an additional \$527 million in fiscal year 2025 for Hurricane Sandy, which occurred in 2012, primarily through Public Assistance, which funds projects to restore community infrastructure, among other things.

¹²FEMA may also reimburse other agencies from the Disaster Relief Fund for mission assignments.

By October 7, 2024, 11 days after Helene made landfall, FEMA reported it approved more than \$208 million in disaster assistance and the federal government deployed nearly 7,000 personnel. In North Carolina, the response included more than \$32 million in disaster assistance, 800 FEMA staff on the ground, and over 1,200 urban search and rescue personnel within the first 10 days.¹³ According to FEMA's July 2025 Disaster Relief Fund report, the agency estimates providing about \$11.2 billion in disaster assistance for Hurricane Helene in fiscal year 2025, with more than half of that obligated in the first 3 months of the disaster.¹⁴

FEMA obligations from the Disaster Relief Fund included those for mission assignments to other federal agencies and related personnel deployments to support the relevant emergency support functions. For example, USACE reported that, by about a month after Helene, the agency had deployed approximately 360 personnel to assist with a variety of mission assignments. These include temporary emergency power, debris removal, and assessments and emergency repairs of water systems.

Following Hurricane Milton, FEMA provided additional assistance to some of the same areas of the southeastern U.S. that were affected by Hurricane Helene. By October 13, 2024, 4 days after Milton made landfall, FEMA reported it had deployed more than 8,500 people to help with response and recovery for both Hurricanes Helene and Milton. According to FEMA's July 2025 Disaster Relief Fund report, the agency estimates obligating a total of \$4.4 billion in disaster assistance for Milton in fiscal year 2025 to Florida and the Seminole Tribe of Florida, with more than half of that obligated in the first 3 months of the disaster.¹⁵

2025 Los Angeles wildfires. FEMA and other federal agencies were key response contributors following the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires. For example, within 1 week of the disaster, FEMA reported deploying 475 staff to support response. FEMA estimates obligating a total of \$2.8 billion in disaster assistance in fiscal year 2025 for the wildfires, with more than 95 percent of that obligated within the first 3 months of the disaster, according to its July 2025 Disaster Relief Fund report. EPA also provided significant support for hazardous materials removal following the wildfires. As of February 17, the agency reported deploying 121 teams—a total of approximately 1,600 personnel—to remove lithium-ion batteries and to survey, remove, and dispose of hazardous materials.¹⁶

¹³FEMA response staff have a variety of responsibilities. For example, the agency's Incident Management Assistance Teams consist of staff with expertise in particular response functions—such as operations, logistics, and planning—that rapidly deploy to lead and coordinate federal response to incidents. GAO, *2017 Hurricanes and Wildfires: Initial Observations on the Federal Response and Key Recovery Challenges*, [GAO-18-472](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 4, 2018).

¹⁴Appropriations acts have generally required that the FEMA Administrator provide monthly reports on the Disaster Relief Fund. See Pub. L. No. 114-4, 129 Stat. 39, 55-57 (2015) (requiring monthly reports on the Disaster Relief Fund); Pub. L. No. 118-47, div. C, § 306, 138 Stat. 460, 610 (2024) (requiring the reporting requirements for the Disaster Relief Fund in the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act, 2025 (Pub. L. No. 114-4) to apply in fiscal year 2024). Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Disaster Relief Fund: Monthly Report as of July 31, 2025* (August 11, 2025).

¹⁵Department of Homeland Security, *Disaster Relief Fund: Monthly Report as of July 31, 2025*.

¹⁶Environmental Protection Agency, *EPA Hits 75% Complete Milestone in Agency's Largest Ever Wildfire Cleanup* (Feb. 17, 2025).

Concurrent Disasters, Disaster Workforce Capacity, and Training Gaps Amplified Existing Workforce Challenges

FEMA and other federal agencies faced workforce challenges related to the concurrent nature of the disasters, disaster workforce capacity, and training gaps during Hurricanes Helene and Milton and the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires. Further, these recent disasters exacerbated long-standing FEMA workforce management issues. We previously reported that FEMA had an overall staffing gap—the difference between its on-boarded staff and its staffing target—of approximately 35 percent across different positions at the beginning of fiscal year 2022. We also found that FEMA fell short of its yearly staffing target between 2019 and 2022, and that gap continues to grow.¹⁷

Concurrent disasters. The concurrent nature of recent disasters put additional strain on the federal response workforce. FEMA officials noted that major disaster declarations and resulting staff deployments occurred in the same general timeframe and same region as Hurricanes Helene and Milton. For example, Helene and Milton shortly followed Hurricane Debby, which made landfall in August 2024 in Florida. The president approved major disaster declarations for Hurricane Debby in five states including Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina.

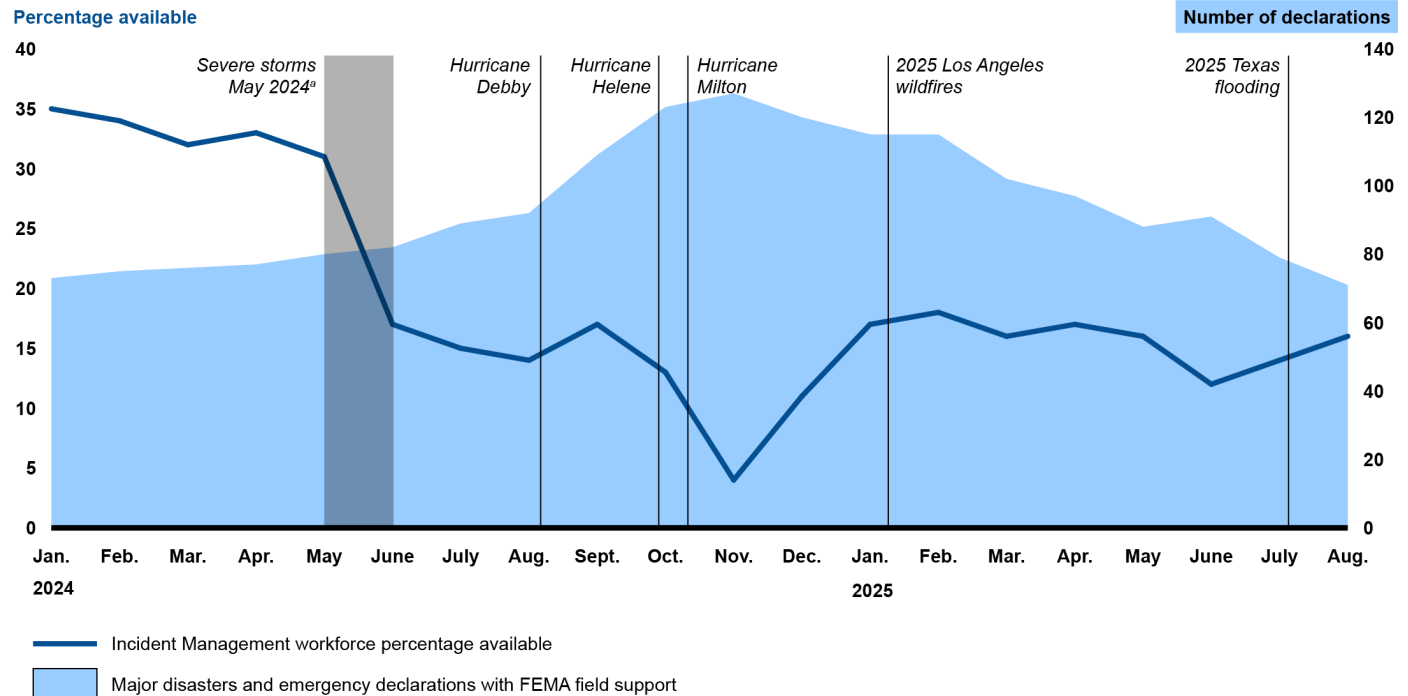
According to agency operations briefs, FEMA started the 2024 hurricane season (beginning June 1, 2024) with only 17 percent of its incident management workforce available, primarily because staff were already in the field supporting over 80 major disaster and emergency declarations across the country, as shown in figure 4.¹⁸ This percentage is lower than in the prior 3 years entering hurricane season. Specifically, FEMA had 24 percent of its incident management workforce available entering hurricane season in 2023, 34 percent in 2022, and 31 percent in 2021. FEMA's low staff availability in June 2024 continued in January 2025 leading into the Los Angeles wildfires. In July 2025, a month into the 2025 hurricane season, flash flooding affected central Texas. As of July 4, when the deadly floods began, FEMA reported 15 percent of its incident management workforce was available.¹⁹

¹⁷[GAO-23-105663](#), [GAO-25-107743](#). We are currently reviewing FEMA's workforce size and composition since fiscal year 2023, the extent to which FEMA is addressing existing and future workforce staffing needs, and how FEMA allocates and prioritizes staffing resources when responding to multiple or concurrent disasters.

¹⁸FEMA's incident management workforce is composed of positions that lead, manage, and deliver response and recovery operations and generally deploy to field sites.

¹⁹Due to the timing of this review, we plan to include more information about the Texas response mission in subsequent products in this series.

Figure 4: Percentage of FEMA Incident Management Workforce Available and Major Disaster and Emergency Declarations with Field Support, January 1, 2024 to August 1, 2025



Source: GAO summary of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) data. | GAO-25-108598

Note: This graphic reflects the date the events began, or the date the hurricanes made landfall in the U.S., as applicable.

^aIn May 2024, a severe weather outbreak included tornadoes in 23 states, and a storm with 100 mile per hour winds in Houston, Texas.

FEMA officials confirmed that the concurrent disasters in 2024 challenged response efforts. Officials from FEMA Region 4—which covers most of the states impacted by Hurricanes Helene and Milton—stated that the multi-state impacts of two hurricanes occurring within weeks of each other required the agency to deploy additional staff from FEMA headquarters and other FEMA regions to respond.²⁰ Officials stated that they had not previously experienced that level of reliance on responders from outside their region. FEMA officials also noted that the agency was already short-staffed heading into the 2024 hurricane season due to the number of other disasters declared in the months prior.

USACE officials stated that the concurrent and increasing number of catastrophic disasters has required the agency to maintain a high level of disaster response effort for longer periods of time, further draining its staffing resources. According to officials, USACE had over 1,030 personnel in the field in April 2025 supporting multiple disasters simultaneously. For instance, USACE officials stated they still had staff supporting the 2023 Maui wildfire recovery efforts in August 2025 and anticipated having staff in North Carolina until at least the fall of 2025 and in Los Angeles until early 2026.

Disaster workforce capacity. FEMA, USACE, and EPA have different workforce structures and levels of scalability, and each agency relies on a limited number of permanent staff and on-call disaster responders. Recent disasters strained each agency's staff capacity, including exhausting the number of available staff for key response functions and longer-term response missions. In some cases, response efforts required staff to put their primary responsibilities on hold.

²⁰FEMA has 10 Regional offices located across the United States. Region 4 is responsible for Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

- **FEMA.** FEMA reported employing 23,620 total staff as of June 1, 2024, including almost 5,100 permanent full-time staff who support FEMA’s mission areas and operations on a daily basis. FEMA’s workforce also consists of other categories of employees, including term-limited positions in its cadre of on-call response and recovery employees and those employed intermittently as reservists. FEMA can also deploy its Surge Capacity Force—volunteers from the Department of Homeland Security and other federal agencies—as needed to assist with response and recovery for disasters. For example, FEMA activated about 1,290 Surge Capacity Force volunteers to respond to Hurricanes Helene and Milton in 2024, according to agency officials. Additionally, the agency uses contracts for goods and services to respond to natural disasters.²¹

Following Hurricanes Helene and Milton, only 4 percent of FEMA’s incident management workforce was available to deploy according to the agency’s November 1, 2024, operations briefing. In addition, several incident management cadres with critical responsibilities in early response had even lower availability.²² On November 1, 2024, for example, the Individual Assistance cadre had 0.3 percent (9 of 2,585) available. This cadre is responsible for helping survivors understand and apply for FEMA assistance. On the same date, the Logistics cadre had 0.8 percent (13 of 1,637) available. This cadre is responsible for ensuring FEMA has supplies and equipment in the right place at the right time to respond to disasters.

- **USACE.** According to USACE officials, the agency has about 15 full-time staff who are dedicated to supporting the federal response to emergency and major disaster declarations under the *National Response Framework* Public Works and Engineering emergency support function. USACE supplements these staff with volunteers from within the agency and has contracts for services such as debris removal and monitoring.

Additionally, USACE officials stated that since 2017, their employees have encountered challenges associated with reaching their annual cap on premium pay.²³ Once an employee reaches the annual cap, that employee can no longer earn premium pay that calendar year. In May 2025, USACE officials estimated that going into the 2025 hurricane season, 10 percent of the agency’s response workforce will have already reached their annual cap on premium pay. As a result, the agency cannot provide premium pay for overtime to those employees, as well as additional employees that reach the annual cap during the hurricane season. This could affect USACE and other federal responders’ capacity to support response and recovery for the remainder of disasters that occur in the 2025 calendar year.

- **EPA.** EPA officials told us they do not have any employees dedicated solely to natural disaster response. Instead, the agency relies on their force of about 210-260 on-scene coordinators to respond to disasters. EPA officials said

²¹GAO, *Disaster Contracting: Opportunities Exist for FEMA to Improve Oversight*, [GAO-25-107136](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 6, 2025).

²²FEMA’s incident management workforce is organized into 23 cadres by type of work (organizational or programmatic function). These cadres are based on skills and experience and generally deploy to an incident at varying points in the response and recovery phases, depending on their functions.

²³Title 5 federal employees whose work is performed in connection with an emergency are generally subject to an annual cap on premium pay, which is additional pay provided to employees for working certain types of hours, such as overtime. If the annual cap on premium pay is reached, the employee may not receive any more premium pay that calendar year. 5 U.S.C. § 5547; 5 C.F.R. § 550.106.

that deploying the agency's on-scene coordinators for disaster response leads to backlogs in these coordinators' primary responsibilities related to oil and hazardous material spills. Additionally, EPA has a surge volunteer force of other EPA employees that the agency can field when necessary and uses contractors to supplement disaster response.

EPA officials also cited the fast pace of its response mission for the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires and related strain on its workforce capacity as challenging. On January 26, 2025, FEMA directed the EPA to complete household hazardous materials removal for the wildfires within 30 days,²⁴ while EPA officials stated that a mission this size would typically take 2 to 4 months. EPA met this accelerated timeframe, but officials stated the consequences of doing so included staff burnout and a significant percentage of their response workforce hitting their annual caps on earning premium pay only months into the calendar year.

Training gaps. In part due to these disaster workforce capacity limitations, agencies deployed surge staff with limited disaster-specific expertise or training. FEMA officials told us that following Hurricane Helene, for example, the agency deployed employees who were not fully trained for response and recovery activities.

FEMA officials said the agency deployed grant management employees, although these staff do not normally work on disaster response. As such, they stated it was a challenge to prepare these staff effectively. Shortages of experienced staff affected the delivery of FEMA programs such as Individual Assistance. For example, FEMA deployed staff to its Disaster Recovery Centers to help survivors apply for assistance. Officials stated that staff who deployed with lower levels of training and expertise were more likely to encounter difficulty in helping survivors apply for assistance and contributed to frustration among survivors. They also often needed to escalate applications to more experienced colleagues, increasing the workload of those staff and creating delays in the application process. FEMA officials stated that, in December 2024, the agency had a backlog of about 500,000 such applications.

In response to the challenge of training gaps, FEMA is re-emphasizing its "Every Employee is an Emergency Manager" policy, which assigns almost every FEMA employee an incident management or incident support position and requires employees to complete necessary training.²⁵

Similarly, officials from USACE stated their Planning and Response Teams sometimes do not have the technical expertise or training to assist with certain FEMA mission assignments.²⁶ According to officials, the agency has experienced an increase in non-standard mission assignments outside of those for which its Planning and Response Teams train and prepare. In these instances, officials stated they have deployed other USACE employees to assist with these assignments. USACE officials noted this requires more of their staffing resources.

²⁴According to FEMA officials, the accelerated timeframe came from the White House, although FEMA was responsible for directing the EPA to implement it.

²⁵Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Every Employee is an Emergency Manager*, Memorandum (April 29, 2025).

²⁶USACE uses Planning and Response Teams to provide public works and engineering related support during natural and manmade emergencies. Each team is organized by mission area, such as debris removal or temporary emergency power, and is comprised of USACE employees who volunteer and undergo special response training.

Long-Standing Challenges and Increasing Demand on Federal Disaster Workforce

The federal response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton and the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires demonstrated agencies' abilities to mobilize responders and commit substantial resources to protect lives and property during a period of high demand. However, we have previously reported on challenges with FEMA's workforce capacity and in February 2025 added *Improving the Delivery of Federal Disaster Assistance* to our High-Risk List in part due to long-standing challenges in this area.²⁷ For example, in May 2023, we found that FEMA had a growing need for disaster staff, but faced challenges with attrition and increased employee burnout.²⁸ FEMA attributed this in part to the year-round pace caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing number of disasters. In addition, FEMA and its federal partners, including USACE and EPA, have been called upon more often to help communities respond to and recover from disasters, further stretching their workforces.

According to FEMA operations briefs, the agency started the 2025 hurricane season on June 1 with 12 percent of its incident management workforce available to respond to disasters. At the same time, the agency had 710 open major disaster and emergency declarations still receiving some kind of federal support, 91 with support in the field.²⁹ This is an increase from 495 open major disaster and emergency declarations just three years prior in July 2022.³⁰ When new disasters hit and these staff are redeployed to respond to them, it diverts resources and potentially delays efforts on open disasters. For example, FEMA Region 3 officials said they deployed 75 percent of the region's employees to Virginia for Hurricane Helene, requiring them to pull staff from response and recovery efforts for other ongoing disasters.

USACE and EPA also face workforce capacity challenges with the increasing number of disasters and officials noted concerns over the availability of responders. USACE officials stated the number of disasters to which USACE responds each year has increased, especially after 2017. Specifically, they reported responding to 36 disaster incidents in 2024, compared to 25 in 2017. Additionally, EPA officials stated that disaster response has become a 365-days-a-year responsibility for the agency, which places a burden on the agency and responders.

Workforce Reductions May Impact Readiness for Future Disasters

With above normal hurricane and wildfire seasons expected this year, recent reductions in the federal workforce, including the loss of experienced emergency

²⁷[GAO-25-107743](#).

²⁸[GAO-23-105663](#).

²⁹FEMA can also issue Fire Management Assistance Grant declarations when a wildfire burns on public or private land and threatens to become a major disaster. 42 U.S.C. § 5187(a). As of June 1, 2025, FEMA reported there were 338 open Fire Management Assistance Grant declarations, in addition to the 710 major disaster and emergency declarations.

³⁰GAO, *Disaster Recovery: Actions Needed to Improve the Federal Approach*, [GAO-23-104956](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2022).

managers, may exacerbate existing challenges and impact the federal government's readiness to respond to future disasters. Both Congress and the President have signaled an interest in broader reforms to FEMA's scope and mission, including transitioning roles to state and local governments. However, as of this report, these efforts have not changed FEMA's disaster response role under the Stafford Act or the *National Response Framework*. FEMA officials stated that changes to their mission and expectations are happening in real time but were not able to provide details on changes to the federal response role.

In January 2025, the President established a FEMA Review Council to produce a report that, among other things, is to assess FEMA disaster response efforts in the previous 4 years—including the sufficiency of staffing—and make reform recommendations.³¹ The President also signed an Executive Order stating the policy of the U.S. is that state and local governments and individuals play a more active and significant role in national resilience and preparedness. The order requires review and revision of response and preparedness policies, among other things.³² Additionally, Members of Congress have introduced legislation that would change how FEMA and other federal disaster programs operate, such as by requiring a unified intake process and system for applicants for disaster assistance.³³

At the same time, since January 2025, the Executive Branch has taken several steps to reduce the size of its workforce. Specifically, agencies have offered eligible federal employees early retirement, voluntary separation pay, or deferred resignations. Additionally, the President directed an Executive Branch-wide hiring freeze of civilian positions through October 15, 2025.³⁴ Officials at FEMA, USACE, and EPA noted reductions in their workforce and shared concerns about meeting disaster response mission capabilities.

FEMA experienced reductions across its workforce, including the loss of veteran leadership and within its pool of surge support volunteers. According to FEMA data, the number of active FEMA employees decreased from about 25,800 as of January 1 to about 23,350 as of June 1, 2025. This decrease of 2,446 includes the 1,465 employees who participated in a workforce reduction program as of June 1, 2025, and employees who left the agency for any other reason, as

³¹Exec. Order No. 14,180, *Council to Assess the Federal Emergency Management Agency*, 90 Fed. Reg. 8743 (Jan. 31, 2025).

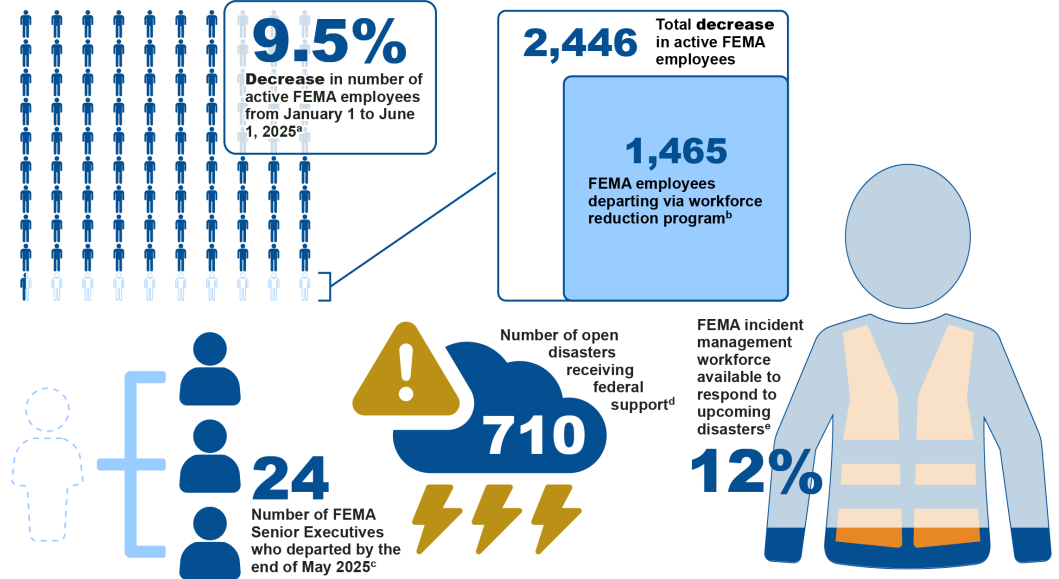
³²Exec. Order No. 14,239, *Achieving Efficiency Through State and Local Preparedness*, 90 Fed. Reg. 13,267 (March 21, 2025). The second product in this series will focus on state and local preparedness and effects on response.

³³See, e.g., H.R.152, 119th Cong. (2025), H.R. 1245, 119th Cong. (2025), H.R. 2342, 119th Cong. (2025), H.R. 316, 119th Cong. (2025); S. 861, 119th Cong. (2025).

³⁴The memorandum does not apply to military personnel of the armed forces or positions related to immigration enforcement, national security, or public safety. The White House Memorandum, *Hiring Freeze*, 90 Fed. Reg. 8247 (Jan. 28, 2025); The White House Memorandum, *Memorandum on Extension of Hiring Freeze* (April 17, 2025); The White House Memorandum, *Ensuring Accountability and Prioritizing Public Safety in Federal Hiring* (July 7, 2025).

shown in figure 5. Agency data indicates about 950 permanent, full-time employees participated in one of these programs.³⁵

Figure 5: FEMA by the Numbers: Entering the 2025 Hurricane Season (June 2025)



Source: GAO summary of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) data; Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-25-108598

^aThis is the percent decrease in the number of active FEMA employees, according to agency data. The decrease of 2,446 active employees includes FEMA employees who separated from the agency for any reason, as well as those placed on administrative leave as part of a deferred resignation program.

^bBoth the Office of Personnel Management and the Department of Homeland Security have offered participation in voluntary workforce reduction programs to eligible FEMA employees. This number represents the number of FEMA employees who participated in one of these programs as of June 1, 2025, according to the agency.

^cAccording to FEMA data, 24 Senior Executive Service-level employees departed the agency by the end of May 2025, including 20 who participated in a workforce reduction program. In the prior 3 fiscal years, the agency averaged just under 13 Senior Executive Service-level departures per year.

^dAs of June 1, 2025, FEMA reported there were 710 open major disaster and emergency declarations still receiving some kind of federal support.

^eFEMA's incident management workforce includes employees who lead, manage, and deliver response and recovery operations and generally deploy to traditional field or related sites. As of June 1, 2025, the agency reported that 12 percent of these employees were available to deploy to a disaster.

FEMA officials noted it is challenging to lose staff with experience and expertise and that the agency now faces significant skills gaps in its leadership cadre. According to agency data, 24 Senior Executive Service employees had departed the agency between January 25 and June 1, 2025, just before the start of the hurricane season. Of these, 20 departed as part of a workforce reduction program. By contrast, in the prior 3 fiscal years, the agency reported averaging just under 13 Senior Executive Service-level departures per year. According to agency officials, FEMA's Senior Executive Service Cadre was staffed at 50 percent as of mid-June 2025.³⁶ Agency communications indicate the senior leaders who departed in recent months generally had experience managing

³⁵Both the Office of Personnel Management and the Department of Homeland Security have offered such programs to eligible FEMA employees. Full-time permanent and Senior Executive Service employees were eligible for both programs, and Cadre of On-call Response/Recovery Employees were eligible for the Office of Personnel Management program. Intermittent staff that are on call to respond to disasters, such as reservists and local hires, were not eligible for either program. The Department of Homeland Security also offered Voluntary Early Retirement Authority and Voluntary Separation Incentive Payment for eligible employees. We have ongoing work examining workforce reductions at the Department of Homeland Security and other federal agencies.

³⁶In fiscal years 2023 and 2024, the agency reported employing about 100 Senior Executive Service employees on average.

complicated disasters. For example, one had been deployed to over 210 events and was described as one of the most experienced field leaders in the nation. Another had managed over 100 disaster and emergency declarations and \$9.4 billion in disaster obligations.

Workforce reductions have impacts beyond FEMA's leadership cadre or permanent employees. FEMA officials stated that the agency plans to leverage staff augmentation strategies such as the surge capacity force to fill agency gaps this year in light of workforce reductions. As stated above, almost 1,300 surge capacity volunteers deployed to Hurricanes Helene and Milton alone in 2024. However, officials also stated that, entering hurricane season 2025, the agency anticipates having the capacity to deploy 600 surge capacity volunteers total due in part to federal workforce reductions at other federal agencies that provide surge staff.

FEMA officials also stated the agency's capacity to train staff may be reduced in light of recent workforce reductions. FEMA's Field Operations Directorate has documented gaps in the agency's ability to train and qualify the workforce at the rate needed to adequately respond to catastrophic and/or concurrent disasters since 2023. Due to recent losses in staff, including training staff, the agency acknowledged a potential loss of institutional knowledge that may impact its ability to provide qualified subject matter experts.

Officials at USACE and EPA shared similar concerns about meeting disaster response mission responsibilities:

- **USACE.** In May 2025, USACE officials estimated that about 10 percent of their agency's staff had already departed or would soon depart the agency. Officials were determining what actions the agency would need to take to meet disaster needs with the hiring freeze in place and the start of hurricane season. Officials stated they may be able to supplement their workforce with contractors, although contractors may be limited in the tasks they can perform.³⁷ In August 2025, USACE officials stated that they anticipated there would be impacts to their disaster response efforts from workforce reductions but were still determining the magnitude of such impacts. The agency did not have data available at that time on the exact number of employees participating in workforce reduction programs.
- **EPA.** In May 2025, EPA officials stated they expected to lose some on-scene coordinators—the employees they deploy for disaster response due to workforce changes. Officials also stated that it takes years to train these employees to reach a basic functional level, let alone build expertise. In August 2025, EPA officials told us that about 2,300 agency employees had participated in a deferred resignation program so far, including five on-scene coordinators. However, officials stated that a third round of the deferred resignation program was in process and the final numbers remain pending. Reductions in EPA's workforce combined with the hiring freeze have the potential to impact the agency's ability to respond to future disasters, according to EPA officials.

Given continued demands on the federal response workforce and recent staff reductions, the federal government will likely need to meet its disaster response mission with fewer available resources this year. Should the U.S. experience a similarly catastrophic peak hurricane season in September and October 2025, as

³⁷For example, according to the Federal Acquisition Regulation, contracts are not to be used for inherently governmental functions. Inherently governmental functions include the direction and control of federal employees. 48 C.F.R. § 7.503.

it did in 2024, meeting response needs could be a major challenge. Moreover, no concrete changes to disaster response roles have yet been made. FEMA and other federal agencies spreading a reduced number of staff across the same or higher number of disasters nationwide could reduce effectiveness of federal disaster response for upcoming disasters. We will continue to monitor developments in this area as part of our ongoing work.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of Homeland Security, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Secretary of Defense, the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, and the Chief of Engineers and Commanding General of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for review and comment. All three agencies provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

How GAO Did This Study

This product focuses on federal response workforce readiness and federal response efforts and challenges during Hurricanes Helene and Milton and the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires. It also reports on recent changes to the response workforce and implications for future disasters.

To describe the support provided and the challenges related to the federal response workforce, we reviewed laws and disaster response frameworks outlining roles and authorities, and incident specific plans and briefs to describe activities and challenges related to specific disasters. We reviewed data on available personnel and resources from 2021 through 2025. This included incident management workforce availability data from FEMA's Daily Operations Briefs and Senior Leadership Briefs, as well as data from agencies' press releases and other documentation, as applicable.

Additionally, we conducted site visits to areas in North Carolina, Florida, and California affected by Hurricanes Helene and Milton and the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires. We interviewed federal, state, and local officials to gather additional information on the response efforts and associated challenges. For example, we interviewed USACE and EPA officials and FEMA headquarters and regional officials from regions affected by Hurricanes Helene and Milton and the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires.

To identify recent changes related to the federal responder workforce that may affect future disaster response, we reviewed Executive Orders and public communications such as White House Memoranda, as well as department and agency communications. We also interviewed or reviewed written responses from federal officials and obtained summary data from FEMA about its workforce changes. These summary data came from National Finance Center payroll information and an internal agency tracker for the number of personnel participating in workforce reduction programs.

To assess the reliability of FEMA's National Finance Center payroll data and Disaster Relief Fund obligations data, we used information collected for our prior work, including interviews or written responses with agency officials and reviews of database documentation. To assess the reliability of FEMA's workforce reduction data and data from the agency's Daily Operations and Senior Leadership Briefs, we interviewed or obtained written responses from knowledgeable officials. Based on these steps, we determined that the data presented in this report were sufficiently reliable for our purposes.

We conducted this performance audit from June 2025 to September 2025 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and

conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

List of Addressees

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate

The Honorable Rand Paul, M.D.
Chairman
The Honorable Gary C. Peters
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Andy Kim
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Disaster Management, District of Columbia and the Census
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Katie Britt
Chair
The Honorable Chris Murphy
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Homeland Security
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable Andrew Garbarino
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Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

The Honorable Sam Graves
Chairman
The Honorable Rick Larsen
Ranking Member
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
House of Representatives

The Honorable Mark Amodei
Chairman
The Honorable Lauren Underwood
Acting Ranking Member
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Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

The Honorable Thom Tillis
United States Senate

The Honorable Greg Casar
House of Representatives

The Honorable Joaquin Castro
House of Representatives

The Honorable Jasmine Crockett
House of Representatives

The Honorable Lloyd Doggett
House of Representatives

The Honorable Veronica Escobar
House of Representatives

The Honorable Lizzie Fletcher
House of Representatives

The Honorable Sylvia Garcia
House of Representatives

The Honorable Vicente Gonzalez
House of Representatives

The Honorable Al Green
House of Representatives

The Honorable Julie Johnson
House of Representatives

The Honorable Marc Veasey
House of Representatives

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Department of Homeland Security, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Secretary of Defense, the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, and the Chief of Engineers and Commanding General of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

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