

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0923

January 12, 2026

Thank you, Chairman Graves, Ranking Member Larsen, and Members of the Committee. As the Representative for Florida's 23rd Congressional District — and the only former statewide Emergency Management Director to ever serve in Congress — I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about how current Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) policies are affecting states' ability to recover from disasters. While states are being asked to respond faster and shoulder greater upfront costs, recent changes in FEMA's reimbursement and approval processes have slowed the delivery of federal assistance that states and local governments are relying on.

Today, states are struggling to plan ahead due to unprecedented delays and policy shifts at FEMA. In late 2025, FEMA postponed roughly \$11 billion in disaster reimbursements to 45 states, shifting payments originally planned for fiscal year 2025 into fiscal year 2026 without a clear timeline for when those funds would be delivered. This decision created significant uncertainty for state and local governments that had already incurred disaster response costs and were relying on timely federal reimbursement to support ongoing recovery efforts. These delays reflect more than a one-time funding decision and point to broader changes in how FEMA is being administered.

These reimbursement delays are part of a broader pattern in which recent Department of Homeland Security (DHS) policy changes have centralized decision making and slowed execution, creating obstacles for states during both emergency response and long-term recovery. Under DHS Secretary Kristi Noem, the Department instituted a directive requiring the Secretary's personal approval for all project expenditures exceeding \$100,000, including routine FEMA disaster projects, inserting political-level review into time-sensitive operational decisions.

As someone who has managed disasters at the state level, I have long believed that FEMA's placement within DHS slows the agency down and burdens it with unnecessary bureaucracy. FEMA's mission is operational and time sensitive, yet department wide policies and an increasingly politicized approval process now dictate how and when the agency can act. This structure reduces FEMA's flexibility, delays critical decisions, and leaves states waiting on reimbursements for costs they have already incurred. Any serious effort to improve disaster recovery must address these structural constraints and ensure FEMA can operate with the speed and focus its mission requires.

That is why I previously introduced the FEMA Independence Act, to restore FEMA as a stand-alone agency with a direct line to the President and remove it from DHS-wide bureaucratic constraints that slow decision making. I appreciate that this Committee has carried that reform forward through the bipartisan H.R. 4669, the Fixing Emergency Management for Americans Act. FEMA needs the ability to act quickly, cut through bureaucracy, and lead when disaster strikes.

While that is an important step in the right direction, I also believe we should continue exploring ways to give states more flexibility in how they administer disaster recovery programs. That is why I introduced the Disaster Housing Flexibility Act and the Disaster Response Flexibility Act to allow states to opt into a block grant model for housing and public assistance. These proposals are rooted in my experience managing state block grant programs during my time as the Director of Florida's Division of Emergency Management, where getting resources out the door quickly made a real difference.

These kinds of reforms are not about shifting responsibility. They are about recognizing that some states have the capacity and readiness to move faster — and we should empower them to do so when appropriate. A voluntary block grant framework would allow FEMA to focus more of its capacity on states that need the most federal support, while giving states with strong emergency management infrastructure more say in their own recovery. Not only would it reduce administrative burden and increase efficiency, it would also give states the flexibility to tailor assistance in ways that make the best use of available resources. It is a flexible, scalable model worth considering as we look ahead.

When disasters overwhelm state and local capacity — whether hurricanes, wildfires, floods, tornadoes, or extreme heat — FEMA provides the coordination, expertise, and resources that make recovery possible. Weakening the agency through structural constraints and policy-driven delays does not make states stronger. It leaves them carrying more risk, waiting longer for assistance, and less prepared for the next disaster.

You all have taken a critical step forward by restoring FEMA's independence and exploring new ways to cut red tape and strengthen the federal-state partnership. I appreciate the Committee's work to advance these reforms, and I look forward to continuing the conversation about how we make FEMA stronger, smarter, and more responsive for the challenges ahead.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.