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## **FEMA Spends More Preparing for Terrorism Than Hurricanes.**

**Readiness grants aimed at hurricanes and floods have for years been far smaller than those for counter-terrorism.**

In the days and hours before Hurricane Laura reached the Gulf Coast, emergency personnel took up positions in Texas and Louisiana and readied half a million meals and 800,000 liters of water. It's the role of the Federal Emergency Management Agency to coordinate the immediate response to storms, floods and wildfires, all of which have become more common as a result of global warming. But even though scientists have warned of increasingly extreme weather, preparation for climate-related disasters hasn't been FEMA's top spending priority.

An analysis of preparedness grants disbursed by FEMA shows the agency spends far more on counter-terror than natural disasters. In 2019, for example, the U.S. Government Accountability Office found more than \$1 billion in FEMA grants assigned to counter-terror preparation and only \$315 million in readiness for natural disasters.

Most Americans think of FEMA as the agency that responds to major storms. Its role is most visible in aftermath of hurricane like Laura, which forecasters described as the worst in a century to hit the western U.S. From 2005 to 2019, FEMA spent at least \$460 billion to clean up and rebuild after natural disasters, according to the GAO. That's about \$30 billion per year, on average.

FEMA is part of the Homeland Security Department, so preparation for terrorism threats is also part of its job. The current spending disparity is a result of laws passed after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. "Most preparedness grants since 9/11 have been spent on counter-terrorism," said Chris Currie, a director in GAO's homeland security team who wrote a recent report on FEMA disbursements. FEMA did not respond to a request for comment.

Only one of FEMA's three main preparedness grant programs allows money to be spent without meeting a terrorism requirement. That program, the Emergency Management Preparedness Grant, has been funded sporadically over the years and, unlike the two counter-terror grants, requires a 50/50 matching expenditure from localities receiving the funds. As a result, poorer municipalities have less access to preparedness money for storms and floods.

There are new FEMA grant programs for 2020 that will disburse \$660 million in funding for what the agency calls "pre-disaster mitigation," focusing on resiliency against flooding and the relocation of vulnerable communities. Last year, however, approximately 75% of FEMA's total preparedness grants went to the programs with counter-terrorism links, according to the GAO report.

The agency's Sept. 11-influenced spending priorities weren't adjusted all that much even after Hurricanes Florence and Michael caused over \$50 billion of damage in 2018 across the Carolinas and Florida. A review of FEMA grant requests made by the latter state for 2019 through 2020 shows that a large chunk of the nearly \$14 million has been sought for law enforcement communication, SWAT training, and bomb detection.

“The state uses this grant to prepare for all hazards, including terrorism, cybersecurity, hurricanes, floods, wildfires,” said Samantha Bequer, spokeswoman for the Florida Division of Emergency Management. “Although [Hurricane Michael] was a natural disaster, many first responders relied upon Department of Homeland Security’s grant-funded training, equipment and technology for response and recovery efforts.”

Craig Fugate, who was FEMA administrator under President Obama, agreed that preparedness grants are flexible enough to allow local officials to build up search-and-rescue and emergency management capabilities that would be as helpful in a terrorist attack as a hurricane. And counter-terrorism spending can help with another critical problem: mass shootings. Fugate pointed to the 2015 hostage situation that took place in San Bernadino, California. “A lot of the equipment—everything from robotics, drones, vehicles to get in close, and the training and exercises beforehand—are things funded with Homeland Security money,” he said.

Still, security-focused grants aren’t the best way to make communities more resilient against storms and floods. The recent GAO report cited “long-standing capability gaps” caused in part by counter-terror requirements. And, of course, there have been far more disasters caused by extreme weather than terrorist attacks. This year alone the U.S. is facing record wildfires in California and a hurricane season on pace to be among the most active ever.

FEMA’s funding has also been caught up in the policy response to the coronavirus pandemic. The Trump administration recently ordered FEMA to divert \$44 billion from the agency’s disaster-relief fund to pay for federal unemployment benefits. The measure was a stopgap after Congress failed to enact another Covid-19 stimulus package.

Federal emergency managers maintain their readiness to help states and localities meet the moment, and President Trump declared national emergencies in Texas, Mississippi, Puerto Rico and Louisiana ahead of Hurricane Laura’s landfall. “I don’t think people should be worried about FEMA running out of money during the initial response,” Fugate said in an interview Wednesday evening on Bloomberg Television.

To outside observers, though, FEMA’s preparedness priorities are out of step with the need to defend against global warming. “We need to invest much more in the people and programs we rely upon for these efforts,” said Rob Moore, a senior policy analyst with expertise on preparedness at the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group. “If we don’t, we’re going to stay stuck behind an ever steepening curve of climate-fueled disasters.”

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— *With assistance by Ari Natter*