



One Hundred Nineteenth Congress
Committee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

May 28, 2026

Ms. Orice Williams Brown
Acting Comptroller General
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street Northwest
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Acting Comptroller General Brown:

We are writing to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) examine the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) processes for reviewing major disaster declaration requests and making recommendations to the President regarding whether to approve these requests.

FEMA has historically used quantitative measures obtained through a damage assessment as the primary basis for its recommendations to the President on whether a disaster declaration is warranted.¹ For example, the estimated per capita cost of disaster-related damages has historically been the main factor that FEMA has used to recommend whether a jurisdiction should receive Public Assistance funding.² From 2007 through 2024, presidents have approved disaster declaration requests for Public Assistance each time this per capita cost crossed a certain threshold, according to recent reporting.³ This threshold is calculated by FEMA and is adjusted each year.⁴ Similarly, FEMA considers specific criteria when assessing requests for Individual Assistance and hazard mitigation funding.⁵

Last April reportedly marks the first time that a President has denied a request for Public Assistance following a major disaster whose damages exceeded FEMA's Public Assistance threshold.⁶ Since

¹ *FEMA's Disaster Declaration Process: A Primer*, CONG. RSCH. SERV. (Nov. 12, 2014), <https://crs.gov/reports/pdf/R43784/R43784.pdf>.

² Andrew Rumbach et al., *Proposed Cuts to Federal Disaster Assistance Will Hit States Just as Hurricane Season Ramps Up*, URB. INST. (May 2, 2025), <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/proposed-cuts-federal-disaster-assistance-will-hit-states-just-hurricane-season-ramps>.

³ Thomas Frank, *It's 3 times harder for blue states to get disaster funding under Trump*, POLITICO (Mar. 23, 2026), <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/03/23/trump-denies-disaster-aid-for-democratic-led-states-00831199>.

⁴ *Per Capita Impact Indicator and Project Thresholds*, FEMA (Feb. 3, 2026), <https://www.fema.gov/assistance/public/tools-resources/per-capita-impact-indicator>.

⁵ CONG. RSCH. SERV. *supra* note 1.

⁶ Frank *supra* note 3.

that time, President Trump has denied at least eight additional disaster declarations to jurisdictions with damages exceeding this threshold. Even more concerning, there are indications that the President's decision-making is often based, at least in part, on perceived political support rather than on objective data about a jurisdiction's need for Federal assistance.⁷ Politics can also play a role at the State level. For example, following historic flooding in Mississippi in June 2021, Mississippi's governor refused to request FEMA assistance despite extensive damage to over 500 homes and 250 public roads and buildings.⁸

We are concerned that the Trump administration's pattern of denying disaster declarations to communities who previously would have qualified for assistance may have disproportionate impacts on rural areas, small States, and other underserved communities who have historically struggled to receive equitable assistance from FEMA. For example, one factor that FEMA uses to assess whether Individual Assistance should be authorized is the concentration of damages in the affected jurisdiction.⁹ In rural areas and States like Mississippi, damage is almost inherently disbursed and may be more difficult for FEMA to view and assess.

American communities deserve a consistent, objective, and non-partisan process for determining whether they will receive help from the Federal Government during what may be their most dire time of need. Accordingly, we ask that you assess:

1. Any changes that FEMA has made within the last five years to the processes and factors used to determine whether to recommend that the President grant a major disaster declaration for Individual Assistance, Public Assistance, and/or hazard mitigation assistance, and the rationale for those changes.
2. Data regarding disaster declaration recommendations and decisions from 2016 through 2026, including:
 - a. The number of times FEMA has recommended that the President grant or deny a major disaster declaration for Individual Assistance, Public Assistance, and hazard mitigation assistance.
 - b. The number of times that the President has granted or denied declarations for these categories of assistance.
 - c. How frequently the President's decisions aligned with FEMA's recommendations.
3. The degree to which FEMA and States consider and monitor whether rural and underserved communities are assessed equitably during the damage assessment process and any other processes related to major disaster declarations.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Rep. Bennie Thompson, *Letter to Tate Reeves, Governor of Mississippi, and Stephen McCraney, Director, Mississippi Emergency Management Agency* (Aug. 11, 2021), <https://benniethompson.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/benniethompson-evo.house.gov/files/documents/2021-08-11%20T%20MEMA%20Re%20FEMA%20Flooding%20Assistance.pdf>.

⁹ CONG. RSCH. SERV. *supra* note 1.

4. Any guidance that FEMA provides to States regarding the disaster declaration process, and the extent to which FEMA monitors disaster-affected States' needs prior to receiving a disaster declaration request.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. If you have any questions, please have your staff call 202-226-2616.

Sincerely,



Bennie G. Thompson
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security



Timothy Kennedy
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Emergency Management
and Technology

cc: The Honorable Andrew R. Garbarino, Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security

Melissa Wolf, Congressional Relations
Government Accountability Office