



## Western Governors' Association Policy Resolution 2018-03

### *Federal Disaster Recovery Assistance for Communities in the West*

#### **A. BACKGROUND**

1. In the United States, natural disasters and their economic and public costs have increased significantly in recent years. Federal disaster declarations (including emergency declarations, major disaster declarations, and fire management assistance grants) have surged since they were first utilized in 1953. From 1953 to 1989, the average number of annual federal disaster declarations was 27.8. That number escalated to an annual average of 108.7 from 1990 to 2016. As of October 2017, the federal government has already issued 124 disaster declarations.
2. Accompanying the greater number of natural disasters has been an increasing level of federal disaster aid. From 1980 to 2009, the number of federally-declared disasters which resulted in costs exceeding \$1 billion averaged approximately 4.5, annually. That number has surged. From 2010 to 2016, the numbers rose with an average 10.5 disasters exceeding \$1 billion in costs each year. As of October 2017, a record 15 events exceeded \$1 billion in cost.
3. Certain types of natural disasters pose unique threats to western states and have occurred with greater frequency in recent decades. These include floods, droughts, tornadoes, mudslides, earthquakes and, particularly, wildfires. Wildfires consumed approximately three million acres nationwide in 1960. That total escalated to over ten million acres in 2015. Ninety-six percent are located in western states. In 2016, 5.5 million acres were burned by wildfires, and 88.5 percent of those acres were in western states. Federal agencies' wildfire suppression costs have increased from less than \$240 million in 1985 to over \$2 billion thus far in 2017. Experts project that wildfires will continue to worsen, in terms of acreage burned and in economic impacts.
4. State and local governments have primary responsibility for responding to disasters. The federal government also has a role in disaster response and recovery, and primarily directs its efforts through the Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).
5. Disaster response and long-term recovery create a significant financial burden. Federal funding alleviates some of the strain through FEMA's Public Assistance, Individual Assistance, and Hazard Mitigation Programs. Affected homeowners may seek Individual Assistance; state and local governments may seek Public Assistance to reimburse for costs incurred from debris removal, emergency protective measures during the response, and permanent repair of damaged public infrastructure; and Disaster Mitigation funds can help rebuild. Other federal agencies, such as the Small Business Administration, Department of Agriculture (USDA), Department of Housing and Urban Development, and Federal Highways Administration also have programs designed to assist in disaster recovery efforts. For

example, the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Emergency Watershed Protection Program is designed to protect people and properties from flooding that often follows wildfire events.

6. In recent years some petitions for long-term federal recovery aid have been denied. This has been most apparent in petitions for Individual Assistance to counties affected by wildfires, but has also occurred in connection with state requests for public assistance. A denial of federal aid compounds problems for impacted communities struggling to recover from the devastation of wildfires and slows recovery efforts in many western states.
7. A recent White House State, Local & Tribal Leaders Task Force on Climate Preparedness & Resilience recommended that the federal government “build a stronger culture of partnership and service to communities impacted by disaster.” The report urged that “federal officials can support swift, resilient recovery by coordinating Federal resources and facilitating effective and efficient access to those resources, reflected through clear and consistent guidance, sustained technical support, and effective partnership efforts.”

## **B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT**

1. **Major disasters and extreme weather events are devastating to the people, property, economy, and natural environment of the communities in which they occur.** The impacts of natural disasters can often be far-reaching, with impacts on the national economy, transportation, and the import and export of commodities.
2. **Federal role in disaster recovery:** The federal government plays a critical role in disaster response and long-term recovery efforts. Federal agencies conducting disaster recovery and assistance, as well as the programs which they administer, should receive adequate and consistent funding and flexibility to direct funds where they are most needed.
3. **Access to needed federal recovery programs for communities affected by major disasters:** Many rural western communities have less concentrated populations than eastern states, making it difficult for western states to qualify for individual and public assistance declarations. Federal processes used to evaluate the need for access to disaster aid programs should be reconsidered. In particular, federal agencies should reexamine the standards used to determine the provision of Individual Assistance to homeowners and the access to federal aid needed for recovery from natural disasters that affect western states. Additionally, the historically-underfunded USDA NRCS Emergency Watershed Protection Program should be revisited and strengthened.
4. **State coordination:** FEMA and other applicable federal agencies should work directly with individual states and territories, through governors or their designees, to jointly identify disaster risks and methods by which such risks may be addressed. Additionally, in collaboration with governors or their designees, federal agencies should re-assess the administrative mechanisms to establish the most effective means to determine the necessity and provision of federal disaster assistance. Federal agencies should provide state and local government officials with accessible and clear information on available federal resources and programs and the most effective utilization of those resources in disaster recovery.

5. **Focus on mitigation:** While aid may be provided following a natural disaster, the event itself could be avoided or minimized if resources were directed to pre-disaster mitigation efforts. Rebuilding is too-often conducted without safeguards necessary to prevent future disaster-related damages. This compounds the vulnerability of western communities and resources in the face of natural disasters. Federal legislation should reconsider the important role of pre-disaster mitigation that reduces the risk and minimizes the effects of natural disasters. When possible, pre-disaster mitigation should be incentivized at the state and local levels. Additionally, some western and midwestern states are at risk of catastrophic earthquake. Mitigation assistance beyond that currently administered by FEMA is needed. Finally, mitigation funds tied to Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) declarations assist fire-ravaged communities. The FMAG pilot program should be continued.

C. **GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE**

1. The Governors direct the WGA staff, where appropriate, to work with Congressional committees of jurisdiction and the Executive Branch to achieve the objectives of this resolution including funding, subject to the appropriation process, based on a prioritization of needs.
2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to develop, as appropriate and timely, detailed annual work plans to advance the policy positions and goals contained in this resolution. Those work plans shall be presented to, and approved by, Western Governors prior to implementation. WGA staff shall keep the Governors informed, on a regular basis, of their progress in implementing approved annual work plans.

Western Governors enact new policy resolutions and amend existing resolutions on a biannual basis. Please consult [www.westgov.org/policies](http://www.westgov.org/policies) for the most current copy of a resolution and a list of all current WGA policy resolutions.