

Role of Government in a Disaster

Government agencies play a critical role during times of disaster, but the role may not be clear to disaster victims. National, state and local government have resources that are vital in rescue and recovery operations in time of an emergency.

What Happens and When

Oregon's governor orders a preliminary report to be completed, usually after a disaster has struck. When the report is finished, the governor can request a major disaster or emergency declaration from the President of the United States. The request may be made when it is obvious that the destruction is significant.

- Declaration of Emergency – Allows the President to send supplementary funds to the state and local efforts to save lives and protect property. Total assistance provided in a given declared emergency may not exceed five million dollars.
- Declaration of a Major Disaster – Indicates that the disaster is of significant scope beyond the abilities of state government to manage on its own. Assistance is offered to both the public and private sectors. Once the declaration has been issued, the FEMA is authorized to engage the services of 12 federal departments, 2 agencies, 1 commission, 1 corporation and 1 authority.

The Difference Between Response and Recovery

The kind of relief needed in an emergency depends on the immediate goal of the affected people.

- *Response* – efforts directed to meeting the immediate needs during or soon after the event (food, rescue, shelter, communications, etc.)

Response begins as soon as the disaster is detected or begins to threaten an area. It involves the mobilization and positioning of emergency equipment, evacuation of people, providing food, water, shelter and medical services and bringing damaged services and systems back on line. Local and state responders include agencies and private organizations. When the destruction goes beyond local and state capacities, federal help is called upon.

- *Recovery* – focuses on rebuilding and recovery after the direct dangers of the disaster have passed.

Recovery is the task of rebuilding after a disaster and may take months and even years to complete. Federal loans and grants can help during the recovery state. Costs may well be beyond the capacity of local and state government to repair the infrastructure (water and sewage systems, roads, etc.). Loans and grants are available to rebuild homes, businesses and public facilities, clear debris, and repair roads and bridges.

Types of Assistance

The governor may request 3 types of federal assistance:

- Individual Assistance – For individuals, families, farmers, and businesses, in the form of loans, grants, emergency housing, tax relief and unemployment assistance.
- Public Assistance – Funds for states, local communities and non-profit groups to restore public systems and facilities.
- Matching Mitigation Funds – For states and local communities, for projects, which eliminate or reduce an area’s vulnerability to a hazard.

Federal assistance for state and local governments may include the following:

- Provision of equipment, supplies, facilities and personnel
- Technical assistance
- Loans and occasionally, grants

Private, non-profit institutions that provide educational, utility, medical and other essential services are also eligible for federal aid. The federal government also provides matching “mitigation funds” to reconstruct buildings or utility systems to withstand future disasters.

FEMA

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is an independent federal agency headquartered in Washington D.C. with regional and area offices across the country; at the Mount Weather Emergency Assistance Center and at the FEMA training center in Maryland.

FEMA works in partnerships with other organizations, which are part of the nation’s emergency management system. Partners include state and local emergency management agencies, 27 other federal agencies and the American Red Cross.

Oregon is in Region 10 with Alaska, Idaho, and Washington. The regional FEMA office is located in Bothell, WA. Each state has a FEMA office. In Oregon, it’s located at:

Division of Emergency Management
595 Cottage Street NE
Salem, OR 97310

The regional FEMA office submits a summary of the disaster event along with a recommendation based on the results of a preliminary damage assessment. This accompanies the governor’s request. The federal office of FEMA makes their recommendation to the President, who then declares a major disaster or emergency.

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