



Medill on the Hill

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Disaster relief funds decline, ‘disasters’ on the rise

By: Stephanie Yang – March 13, 2013

The U.S. government has declared 50 percent more national disasters on average over the last 10 years when compared to the previous decade, but the nation’s main disaster relief agency is about to lose more than \$1 billion in federal funding.

How much it will matter is open to interpretation.

The sequester cuts President Barack Obama was required to put into effect on March 1 will cost the Federal Emergency Management Agency \$1.3 billion in funding, according to a White House sequestration budget report for the 2013 fiscal year, ending Sept. 30. Of those cuts, \$928 million will come from FEMA’s disaster relief fund.

FEMA spokesman Dan Watson said the reductions will eventually have an impact on the agency’s disaster preparedness, response and recovery efforts, but will not affect release of disaster aid funds in the near term.

Sequestration “reduces the Disaster Relief Fund by nearly \$1 billion, potentially affecting survivors recovering from Hurricane Sandy, the tornadoes in Tuscaloosa and Joplin and other major disasters across the nation,” he said.

Watson said the impact of the budget cut would hit at the end of the fiscal year, because FEMA’s disaster-relief funds may not cover needs for immediate assistance.

Daniel J. Weiss, director of climate strategy at the Center for American Progress, said although the nation has not needed substantial disaster relief so far this year, droughts in the southwest region will continue to require relief aid the government may not be able to provide. He said disaster preparedness will be affected by cuts as well.

“Congress needs to change its appropriation in order to provide more money for disaster relief,” Weiss said. “While they’re doing that, we’re missing out on resources that are needed in order to help communities plan to become more resilient to these extreme weather events.”

Weiss believes the recent natural disasters are a result of unchecked climate change. Preemptively addressing this issue could mitigate larger costs for the government from future disasters, he said.

“The federal budget is vulnerable to huge future expenditures,” Weiss said, “It would be much more cost effective to reduce the carbon pollution responsible for climate change than clean up the natural disasters that will occur if climate change goes unchecked.”

However, Tad DeHaven, budget analyst at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, insisted sequestration will have no effect on FEMA's ability to fund disaster recovery efforts.

"When any sort of declared disaster happens, all [the federal government needs] to do is pass a bill saying that we authorize the spending to go above the caps," he said. "If Hurricane Sandy happens next year, they'll find the money for it."

DeHaven said the number of declared national disasters has "gone through the roof" in recent years. In 2012, the number of disasters according to FEMA totaled 242, an all-time record. Of those, 99 were declared major disasters by the president.

"Congress and the White House have shown no ability to exercise restraint when it comes to using FEMA for federally declared disasters," DeHaven said. "It's an opportunity for presidents in particular to show that they care and spend money ... but it's been abused."

The disaster declarations cover events ranging from severe storms to wildfires and floods. Although FEMA's disaster response has improved from "the magnitude of failure that you saw in Katrina," DeHaven said the government's Hurricane Sandy relief effort is an example of the political benefit of using federal money for disasters.

"We have not heard the horror stories with Sandy that we've heard with Katrina," DeHaven said. "But there again you can be rest assured the Obama administration took a look at what happened [in the Bush administration's response to Katrina.]"

Hurricane Katrina hit several Gulf Coast states on Aug. 29, 2005, causing an estimated \$100 billion or more in damages. Former president George W. Bush and FEMA were criticized for their slow response in addressing the disaster.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said in February the nation's disaster response system, including FEMA, has transformed over the past four years to better meet citizens' needs.

"We have helped to rebuild FEMA into a strong, agile and capable agency," she said. "I am proud of how today's FEMA and [the Homeland Security Department] dealt with these disasters like Sandy, and I believe reforms we've made over the past four years have made DHS and FEMA the best disaster response agency in the world."

Napolitano said in that time, the department has addressed 285 major disasters. The response to Hurricane Sandy was handled more efficiently in part due to cooperation of the many agencies involved, including the Coast Guard, Transportation Security Administration, FEMA and Customs and Border Protection, she said. Those government agencies "actually created within the entire DHS a search force of people," she said.

Napolitano said the sequester cuts will cost her umbrella department, the DHS, up to 5,000 border patrol agents and other officers.

"Homeland security grant funding will be reduced to its lowest level in seven years, leading to potential layoffs of state and local emergency personnel across our country," FEMA spokesman Watson said.

The White House sequestration report also said the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), parent agency to the National Weather Service, will lose \$271 million in federal funding.

NOAA recorded a list of 11 extreme climate events last year – including Hurricane Sandy – each one resulting in more than \$1 billion in damage. According to the report, 2011 saw a total of 14 “billion-dollar events.”

NOAA spokeswoman Maureen O’Leary said the agency has worked for the last year and a half to prepare a “weather-ready nation.” O’Leary said she felt residents were given adequate advanced notice to prepare for Hurricane Sandy, but NOAA is still working to improve its operations.

“Here at the weather service, we decided we need to do more. We need to step up our game. We need to really explain to people they need to seek shelter, what they need to do, and this could be during any severe weather event,” O’Leary said.

She said NOAA has made improvements this year to its disaster preparation efforts, such as new wireless emergency alerts, upgraded radars and improved warnings for severe weather. It is unclear how the sequester will affect these efforts.

NOAA is an arm of the Department of Commerce, where bureaus within the agency are working on dealing with the money crunch.

“The Department of Commerce is actively working on how to manage the budget cut in a way that protects our core mission to serve the public,” a Commerce official said.

Despite impending cuts, O’Leary said NOAA, paired with FEMA, is “pushing on” with its latest effort to promote disaster preparation. The second annual National Severe Weather Preparedness Week ran from March 3 through March 9. The mission was to encourage citizens to prepare for natural disasters.

“Because effective disaster preparedness depends on engaged citizens, my administration remains committed to giving them the tools they need to keep their neighborhoods safe,” Obama said in a statement on the preparation initiative, released March 1, the same day he signed the sequester cuts.