



FEMA's Top-Down Approach to Disaster Relief Is Fundamentally Flawed

By TAD DEHAVEN - November 1, 2012

Proponents of an activist federal government are citing the destruction wrought by Hurricane Sandy as evidence of the need for big government to manage and finance disaster relief. Of particular worry are possible cuts to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's budget and devolution of responsibility to the states.

The federal government's complete failure to adequately respond to Hurricane Katrina should have given proponents pause, as Katrina demonstrated that a top-down approach to disaster relief is fundamentally flawed. Federal efforts suffer from excessive bureaucratic red tape and an inherent inability to effectively coordinate the dispersion of relief supplies. State and local officials, on the other hand, are naturally closest to those affected and thus better appreciate the needs of their communities.

Another problem is that, like all federal aid, it is manipulated by policymakers for political gain. Studies have shown that presidents issue the most "major disaster" declarations in years they are up for re-election. Indeed, policymakers have apparently decided that handing out disaster relief funds is a good way to curry favor with voters as the average annual number of total disaster declarations has more than tripled since the mid-1990s.

The result is that disaster relief has effectively been nationalized. Instead of the federal government providing assistance for disasters that are truly national in scope, most declarations are made for standard events such as rain and snow storms. But why, for example, should taxpayers in, say, Maine have to subsidize relief efforts for tornado destruction in Kansas? If we allowed the states to again assume responsibility for what happens in their backyards, citizens in affected states would have more incentive to scrutinize the effectiveness and efficiency of relief efforts since they would ultimately be footing the bill.

Proponents of the top-down approach argue that the states are "financially strapped," but so is the federal government. The problem is that the federal government tries to do too much with the result being that it does a lot of things poorly. Suggesting that the states ought to be responsible for handling their own affairs has nothing to do with callousness; it's merely a recognition that the "locals know best." Federal money—and the strings attached to it—won't change that fact.