



FEMA takes step in right direction

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For far too long, FEMA has been involved in routine natural disasters, whose cost should properly be born by the states, not the federal government. FEMA's decision to have states cover a certain amount of disaster's cost before federal funds could be employed is a laudable step in the right direction.



(http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/RTX2F0PO_obama_hurricane-e1469815429317.jpg)

President Obama during a meeting at FEMA Headquarters, May 31, 2016. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque.

No one has been a bigger critic of the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) than I over the last decade. The [thrust of my criticism has focused on the nationalization of disasters starting in 1993](http://www.heritage.org/research/commentary/2012/11/too-many-disasters-) (<http://www.heritage.org/research/commentary/2012/11/too-many-disasters->

For many years, mine was the lone voice calling

are-nationalized) that resulted in FEMA being involved in routine natural disasters which it historically didn't touch. This [great chart](http://dailysignal.com/2012/02/05/chart-of-the-week-obamas-abuse-of-fema-declarations/) (<http://dailysignal.com/2012/02/05/chart-of-the-week-obamas-abuse-of-fema-declarations/>) says it all. In order to get FEMA back out of the business of routine natural disasters, I [proposed eliminating certain types of disasters from being eligible for FEMA declarations, increasing the damage threshold required to trigger a FEMA declaration, and reducing the federal cost-share from 75% to no more than 25% of a disaster's costs](#) (<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/05/fema-s-refusal-to-reform-congress-and-the-federalization-of-natural-disasters>). For many years, mine was the lone voice calling for reform.

for reform. It looks like someone at FEMA heard me.

It looks like someone at FEMA heard me. FEMA [recently announced a proposal](http://www.wsj.com/articles/fema-looks-to-shift-more-disaster-costs-to-states-1469124068) (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/fema-looks-to-shift-more-disaster-costs-to-states-1469124068>) in which states would have to cover a certain amount of a disaster's cost before federal funds would kick in to help. FEMA also proposes giving states credits towards their share if states took actions to mitigate the damages of disasters such as changing building codes to make buildings more resilient to hurricanes or earthquakes. While not perfect, the proposal is a solid step towards the three reforms noted above, for which FEMA should be applauded.

This positive move comes at a time in which FEMA has ramped down the number of declarations it has been issuing. As [I previously wrote](https://www.aei.org/publication/will-obamas-luck-with-natural-disasters-continue/) (<https://www.aei.org/publication/will-obamas-luck-with-natural-disasters-continue/>):

Initially, the Obama administration continued the federalization of disasters started by President Bill Clinton. President Obama actually surpassed President Clinton's single-year record of 75 major disaster declarations set in 1996 (and tied in 2008 by President George W. Bush) when he issued 99 major disaster declarations in 2011. President Obama also exceeded President Clinton's FEMA declaration total of 158 in 1996 by issuing a stunning 242 FEMA declarations in 2011. Keep in mind, these records were set absent any hurricanes or major earthquakes striking America (or volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, or major terrorist attacks).

Whether due to the barrage of criticism and/or the steady hand of FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate, who had served as Florida Governor Jeb Bush's emergency management director, FEMA has cut back on its activities over the last few years. Though the president's yearly average of 117 FEMA declarations is only slightly below President Bush's yearly average of 129.6, President Obama's second term total of 289 FEMA declarations is below President Clinton's first term total of 311 FEMA declarations. It is likely President Obama will surpass that total over the next nine months, but he will remain well below the presidential term record of 577 FEMA declarations.

In the two and a half months since I wrote that piece, the Obama administration, as expected, has [issued more declarations and now stands at 309 declarations](https://www.fema.gov/disasters/grid/year) (<https://www.fema.gov/disasters/grid/year>) during his second term. None of the new declarations involved hurricanes or earthquakes.

At the end of the day, FEMA has spent \$178 billion on major disaster declarations since 1989. FEMA's proposal would help ensure that the costs of those disasters is borne more properly by the people in the states where disasters take place and not subsidized by taxpayers in other states through federal taxes.

Learn more: [Will Obama's luck with natural disasters continue?](http://www.aei.org/publication/will-obamas-luck-with-natural-disasters-continue/)
(<http://www.aei.org/publication/will-obamas-luck-with-natural-disasters-continue/>)
| [Giving states and localities a voice in Washington](http://www.aei.org/publication/giving-states-and-localities-a-voice-in-washington/)
(<http://www.aei.org/publication/giving-states-and-localities-a-voice-in-washington/>)
| [National security policy development](http://www.aei.org/multimedia/national-security-policy-development/)
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