

Not My Fault: An unprecedented disaster declaration for unprecedented times

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard
Posted April 19, 2020

On April 11, President Trump approved a federal disaster declaration for Wyoming to supplement recovery efforts in areas affected by the Coronavirus Disease. Wyoming was the last state to receive a COVID-19 federal disaster declaration, making this the first time in US history that all fifty states were under a disaster declaration at the same time for the same reason. Coronavirus disaster declarations are also currently in place for all US territories except for American Samoa, which has yet to record a case of the virus.

What does this mean? A presidential disaster declaration authorizes FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, to reimburse the affected counties/states for costs related to disaster response. It opens the federal purse strings to reimburse cities, counties and states for costs incurred as a direct result of responding to the coronavirus.

There is much confusion as to how emergency response works. Before a disaster, it seems relatively unimportant and every Office of Emergency Services I've worked with is chronically understaffed and underfunded. After disaster strikes, we want everything to be in place yesterday and working perfectly. It's a complex system with local, state and federal agencies all playing essential roles and needing to work seamlessly together when disaster strikes.

The federal role is always to support local and state efforts. Our Coronavirus disaster response officially began on March 4 when Governor Newsome declared a state of emergency in California and on March 11 when County Health Officer Teresa Frankovich declared a local health emergency. Newsome, like other state governors, requested assistance from the federal government. Trump approved the request from New York State on March 20th and for California and Washington on March 22.

Disaster management has had a checkered past in the US and our current framework for disaster management is only three decades old. Prior to the 1970s, federal

response to major disasters took a piecemeal approach. After three devastating fires that leveled the city of Portsmouth, New Hampshire in the early 1800s, Congress enacted the first legislation to assist in disaster relief. Over the next 130 years, Congress passed more than 100 legislative acts on an ad hoc basis to assist cities with disaster recovery.

An example is what happened after the 1906 Northern California earthquake. The U.S. Army Pacific Division was based in the San Francisco Presidio and the Navy had a major base at Mare Island. The military quickly coordinated much of the response, playing a major role in security, fighting fires, providing medical care, and establishing tent cities for survivors. It was an improvised response; there was no plan in place as to how the region would respond to any major disaster. Congress enacted legislation to pay for emergency response supplies and also appropriated funds for rebuilding public buildings.

Herbert Hoover administration formed the first permanent federal disaster response agency. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation in 1932 was established to lend money to banks and institutions to promote economic recovery during the Great Depression. The legislation also contained language authorizing federal monies to assist in other disaster relief efforts.

Over the next four decades, federal responsibilities in disaster response were established in a number of agencies. In 1934, the Bureau of Public Roads was authorized to reconstruct road infrastructure after floods and storms and ten years later the Flood Control Act gave the Army Corps of Engineers reconstruction responsibilities. Although some of these functions were now permanently budgeted, there was little or no coordination between different agencies and no emphasis on how to reduce vulnerability.

The Nixon administration began the modern era of disaster management in 1974 with passage of the Disaster Relief Act. Congressional support was overwhelming, passing the Senate 91-0 and the House by 392-0. The Act established the process of presidential disaster declarations and created the Federal Disaster Assistance Administration, the first agency designated to oversee all aspects of disaster response. When President Carter created FEMA by executive order in 1979, the new independent agency absorbed other existing agencies with disaster response authority.

In 1988, the Stafford Act modifies the 1974 legislation, to create the current system regulating the financial and

physical assistance authorized by presidential disaster declarations. It put into place mitigation grants for pre-event preparedness and the reporting requirements for any jurisdiction receiving funds.

It hasn't been smooth sailing and FEMA has had plenty of ups and downs. Highly politicized, the agency is quick to be used to photo op perceived successes and become the scapegoat for problematic responses. The slow response to Hurricane Hugo in 1989 led Senator Ernest Hollings to call the agency "the sorriest bunch of bureaucratic jackasses I've ever known." Numerous reports have been written on the inadequacy of FEMA's response to Hurricane Katrina
(<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CRPT-109hrpt377/pdf/CRPT-109hrpt377.pdf>)

The final verdict on how we all did during the COVID-19 pandemic is still years away. Unlike an earthquake or hurricane where the scope of a disaster can be estimated in days, we are still in the middle of this one. How bad it gets won't depend just on the government response but on our own behavior as well. Distance, clean hands, and kindness to one another are actions we can all do.

Note: for an emergency manager's perspective on managing a pandemic, check out <http://jennynovak.com/category/blog/emergency-management/> , written by my former student, HSU alum Jenny Novak.

Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. Questions or comments about this column, or want a free copy of the preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground"? Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email Kamome@humboldt.edu

<https://www.times-standard.com/2020/04/19/lori-dengler-an-unprecedented-disaster-declaration-for-unprecedented-times/>