

FEMA Review Council Response and Recovery Assessment Subcommittee, July 10, 2025

Remarks of Emily Bentley, Chief of Recovery and Mitigation Section, South Carolina Emergency Management Division (SCEMD)

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments for today's subcommittee meeting representing South Carolina. As Recovery and Mitigation Section chief for the South Carolina Emergency Management Division (SCEMD), I lead a team managing about \$3 billion in federal recovery and mitigation grants, coordinating with partners on survivor assistance, and with responsibilities for state mitigation and recovery planning as well as support to counties for mitigation and recovery planning. I will touch on a couple of themes:

- Support for building and maintaining local and state emergency management capabilities is vital.
- State and local governments have varying levels of resources and capabilities and will need time to adjust to substantive changes in federal disaster policy and support.
- Some federal recovery programs will be tougher for states to take on than others.
- Taking the opportunity and putting in the work to improve what we are doing is a positive.

With 13 federally declared disasters (plus three Fire Management Assistance Grants (FMAGs)) in 11 years, South Carolina, like the other states represented today, has developed state-level capabilities to support and coordinate response and recovery activities - in many ways to match up with and adhere to federal policy. South Carolina has an active State Emergency Response Team (SERT) with state-level agencies and organizations that coordinate well during blue-sky as well as emergency operations. We work closely with federal policy and federal agency staff and appreciate the work the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other federal partners have done to support mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery in South Carolina.

The state also has experience with delays and frustrations that are sometimes part of getting grant dollars obligated, so I have no argument with the concept that there is room for improvement in how federal support for disaster response and recovery works. At the state level, we learn something every day that we can do better and improve on in how we handle our responsibilities, communication, and customer service to communities and organizations, and we expect a spirit of continuous improvement from federal counterparts.

Response to and recovery from disaster is an area where we see and practice our nation's system of federalism, with shared responsibilities between the state and federal levels of government. While it may be cliché in emergency management, it is true that disasters begin and end locally. The state supports and coordinates other resources when local capabilities and resources are overwhelmed. Federal support is sought when local and state resources and capabilities are insufficient. The assessment and discussions going on now are not new but may be newly critical: what is the role of federal government compared to states in disaster response and recovery? Where is the best line or marker for when federal support is needed and in what areas?

As this is being considered, South Carolina has begun planning for how it might structure state-led recovery programs. SCEMD and county emergency managers developed a white paper, Future

Considerations for South Carolina, that compiles relevant high-level data and examines some of the potential pain points for local governments and the state as a whole if federal response and recovery support is pared back or eliminated. It notes that many small and rural counties in the state do not have the resources to respond to or recover from a significant disaster event.

- In South Carolina, more than \$6 million in Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG) funds sustain state and local emergency management programs annually. Elimination would drive greater than 50 percent loss of personnel and programmatic capabilities unless a sustainable funding replacement could be found.
- Three billion dollars in FEMA Public Assistance (PA), Individual Assistance (IA) and Hazard Mitigation (HMGP) funding has fueled disaster response, recovery and mitigation programs since 2014. The IA portion is about \$460 million (most of that was for Hurricane Helene).
- Federal investment in national communication systems and physical infrastructure and mitigation projects help communities address aging infrastructure and reduce risk.
- South Carolina is home to four nuclear power stations (three more are close by in neighboring states, which means the technical guidance and preparedness expectations of the Radiological Emergency Preparedness Program (REP) play an important role in maintaining capabilities to respond and recover in the event of a radiological event.
- South Carolina's smaller counties do not have the tax base to contribute additional funds toward response and recovery. For example, rural Barnwell County has three cities and multiple small municipalities and a county population of 20,565. EMPG funding is used for emergency management personnel and to fill training gaps. The county has little room to purchase equipment, supplies, or contract support. Without EMPG funding, the county will have challenges effectively responding to emergencies.

County and state emergency managers have used the white paper to guide discussions with local and state officials and prepare comments for federal requests. From our discussions and planning efforts so far, I offer several recommended priorities:

Support strong and interoperable mutual aid capabilities. South Carolina participates as a provider and recipient of interstate mutual aid under EMAC and maintain intrastate mutual aid agreements that are a key means of resource and personnel support in emergencies or disasters anywhere in the state. Maintaining mutual aid capabilities and coordination, and as a result, interoperable emergency management practices, will be an important piece of shifting more response and recovery responsibility to states. Consistent training and expectations at a national or federal level support effective and efficient integration of mutual aid into response and recovery operations.

Build and maintain local and state emergency management capabilities. A decrease in federal support for disaster recovery would mean that local and state capabilities are all the more vital. Because of that, Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG) funding, or a successor funding stream focused on building and maintaining local emergency management capabilities and preparedness should be continued and increased - not decreased. Similarly, preparedness and training activities that foster consistent best practices should be provided or supported. If heightened state- or association-led roles in these areas are expected, time and coordination will be needed to stand up national (rather than federal), regional, or consortium-type programs.

Specialized response teams. Having regional response teams such as incident management assistance teams (IMATs), search and rescue, disaster medical assistance teams (DMATs), and disaster mortuary operational response teams (DMORTs) available represents a good practice that directly provide specialized response capabilities. States lack the ability to build and sustain these costly capabilities state by state, and to do so probably would not be particularly cost-effective, so federally supported regional teams make sense.

Support to disaster survivors. For me, this would be the heaviest lift for states – at least ours - to handle. Replacing all or parts of the Individuals and Households Program (IHP), which provides financial assistance directly to eligible survivors for housing repair and essential household needs, with 50-plus state programs will be difficult and likely not cost-effective. Improving rates of insurance can be an important piece, but many survivors who will most need assistance after a disaster are those who are uninsured or underinsured because of limited financial resources. Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOADs) are a vital partner in assisting residents and are often there first and last. The state already has a major role in coordinating with VOADs pre- and post-disaster. But VOADs have resource and personnel constraints. Practically speaking, South Carolina has limited capability to stand up a program to pay residents directly. Contracting with a vendor to support a state-led survivor assistance program would be an option, but it would take funding. Also, if multiple states are running survivor assistance programs, coordination and the ability to cross-check systems/registrant lists and deconflict will be needed to minimize fraud. FEMA had improved its efforts, in my estimation, in recent years to identify questionable IA registrations and process them differently. Support to disaster survivors is essential, and FEMA's ability to augment state and local efforts with direct support to residents should be prioritized.

Time and planning: An overarching but foundational request is that if there are to be substantive changes in federal support and/or funding, we ask that states be given time to budget, plan, and develop staff capabilities to address the response and recovery needs that federal partners have supported in recent decades. For example, increasing the Public Assistance Per Capita Indicator (PCI) from \$1.89 to \$7.56 PCI (four times current PCI) would need to be phased in (e.g., across five years) to give states time to appropriate funds to cover response and recovery costs in-state and to create recovery support policies and programs.

A last thought before I conclude: hazard mitigation saves lives and money over time. It buys down or alters risk and so reduces what we need to respond to and recover from. Investment in hazard mitigation and infrastructure protection should be continued at each level of government and across sectors.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to comment. That concludes my remarks pending questions or need for clarification.