

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3203

July 15, 2025

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

It is imperative to the safety, security, and peace of mind of millions of Americans that you immediately conduct a full, independent investigation into the devastating consequences of the Trump administration's deep staffing cuts, policy changes, and spending restrictions at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) — including probing if and how those actions may have directly contributed to dangerous delays in the federal response to the catastrophic July 4th flooding in Kerr County, Texas, which killed over 130 people and left many more still missing.

The facts and allegations emerging are alarming: FEMA contracts were stalled while survivors called for help; vital staff positions sat vacant; rescue and recovery efforts were bogged down by newly instituted bureaucratic chokeholds. If reports are accurate, these aren't just bureaucratic breakdowns — they may very well constitute a dereliction of duty by those entrusted to execute timely and full-fledged disaster response and protect the public in times of crisis. The American people have a right to know: Did these newly imposed procedures and protocols amount to reckless decisions that cost lives and preventable injuries? Are we now more vulnerable when the next storm, fire, flood or other disaster strikes anywhere else across the United States? A comprehensive and urgent review is not just warranted — it is a legal, ethical and national necessity to ensure any deadly failure is never repeated.

In the critical hours and days that followed the catastrophic flood, federal response teams were delayed, including search and rescue personnel, calls from desperate victims were left unanswered, and survivors were left waiting for help that should have come more immediately and comprehensively. Press reports and eyewitness accounts suggest that these delays were not just random, they were the foreseeable consequence of decisions made by Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Kristi Noem under the direction of President Trump.

Since returning to office, the Trump administration has repeatedly expressed its desire to dismantle and even eliminate FEMA and much of the traditional lead response and coordinating role played by the federal government in response to disasters. This year, Trump said "I'll also be signing an executive order to begin the process of fundamentally reforming and overhauling FEMA, or maybe getting rid of FEMA." and just last week, Secretary Noem stated that, "FEMA should not exist the way that it always has been." Since then, the Trump administration has aggressively hollowed out FEMA's capacity and ability to respond to disasters. Approximately 25% of the agency's full-time staff, including key coordinating officers critical to managing response efforts for major disasters and weather events, have been totally eliminated. Earlier this year, the administration took a series of steps to kneecap and dismantle FEMA, including but not limited to: abruptly defunding AmeriCorps' National Civilian Community Corp (FEMA Corps),

which helps communities prepare for and respond to disasters; canceling more than \$3.6 billion in resilience funding through the BRIC program; rolling back long-standing federal flood protection standards; and the administration quietly stopped enforcing rules to protect schoolkids, libraries, and other public buildings from flooding, the Federal Flood Risk Management Standard. Compounding the risky changes that increased the potential for tragedy in the face of disaster, just weeks before the Texas floods, Secretary Noem instituted a new policy requiring her personal sign-off for all FEMA contracts or grants over \$100,000 — delaying critical resources, including contracts for FEMA’s survivor call centers, which left more than 13,000 callers desperately searching for help unanswered. While this delay in serving survivors was widely reported on, it is important to know whether any other federal disaster response services were delayed or unnecessarily hindered by this new policy.

These actions raise deeply disturbing questions about whether FEMA — once one of the most trusted and reliable emergency response agencies in American government — is being actively undermined from within with no plan to replace its vital role in disaster response and coordination with state and local emergency response entities. This approach to disaster response, essentially diminution and potentially abrogation, is extremely risky and leaves the American public in a highly vulnerable situation, once that unnecessarily puts at risk life, health and property. As we begin to analyze the Texas response, we must have all the facts and know any and all deficiencies in the current federal disaster response program to identify dangerous policies and protocols and implement solutions immediately. Providing for the common defense and promoting general welfare remains a core proactive responsibility of the federal government, and Americans deserve to know whether their government is still willing and capable of protecting them no matter when or where in the United States disaster strikes.

For these reasons and many deeply troubling concerns, I request that GAO launch a full audit of FEMA’s current disaster response capacity, with a focus on:

- How staffing cuts, contract delays, and recent policy changes affected the federal response to the July 4th floods in Texas;
- Whether similar conditions are likely to create dangerous delays in future disasters;
- Whether any of the Trump administration’s policies — including but not limited to Secretary Noem’s contract restrictions — violated federal law or FEMA’s regulatory, policy and statutory responsibilities.

More pointedly, I request that GAO address the following questions with all due speed:

1. What is the current staffing level across FEMA offices and how many cuts were made since January 20, 2025?
2. What risks, if any, do these vacancies pose to public safety, response, and recovery following disasters?
3. What is FEMA’s capacity to respond to multiple simultaneous disasters in different regions of the country?
4. In what ways did the staffing vacancies at FEMA contribute to delays, gaps, or diminished services in response efforts related to the July 4 flooding in Texas?
5. Looking forward, how will those vacancies contribute to delays, gaps, or diminished services in future disaster response efforts for which FEMA may be activated?
6. Did reduced staffing impede FEMA’s ability to coordinate with state or local emergency officials, including in Kerr County?
7. Would restoring staffing levels improve the agency’s capacity to respond to disasters, support survivors, and coordinate with emergency managers in impacted regions?

8. How has the loss of AmeriCorps' National Civilian Community Corp, or FEMA Corps, impacted federal disaster response capabilities and services supporting survivors?
9. Has FEMA leadership or DHS received internal warnings or assessments outlining the risks of these staffing and funding decisions? If so, were those warnings shared with FEMA leadership, the Homeland Security Department, the White House, Congress, or any of the above?
10. Has the DHS Secretary's policy of personally approving all FEMA contracts and purchases over \$100,000 contributed to delays in disaster response and recovery activities or otherwise impacted disaster survivors? How will this policy impact future FEMA operations serving disaster survivors?
11. How will the cancellation of mitigation and preparedness funding, including the BRIC program, and the relaxation of hazard mitigation standards, such as the Federal Flood Risk Management Standard, affected communities' disaster preparedness?
12. Has the implementation of any of this administration's actions, including funding cuts, staff vacancies, or other policies implemented since January 20, 2025 changes — individually or collectively — violated FEMA's statutory mission or other federal laws?

The American people must be able to count on FEMA to act with full capability, resources and coordination – and without hesitation – in moments of crisis. But the flood response in Texas potentially exposed systemic vulnerabilities — created not just by natural disasters, but political, management and policy failures. We owe it to the families mourning loved ones, to the communities still waiting for help, and to all Americans that may one day face an unforeseen disaster to determine what went wrong — and to fix it before another disaster strikes.

Thank you for your urgent attention to this matter. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator