FEMA's Influence May Be Cut Under New Department

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The influence of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, described by President Bush as a lead element in his new Department of Homeland Security, may become severely diminished as Congress crafts legislation to create the new department.

An independent agency of 2,500 employees with 10 regional offices, FEMA dispenses relief money and loans in the wake of hurricanes, floods, fires and other natural disasters. It also administers the flood insurance program, trains fire and emergency medical personnel, and has emergency planning groups.

"It's essentially, today, a response organization that comes in after a crisis," according to one congressional expert.

FEMA, since its rejuvenation during the Clinton administration under James Lee Witt, has become one of the most popular agencies with the public and Congress. With the Cold War having ended, Witt, the former director of Arkansas's emergency services, reduced spending and concern with civil defense preparations to meet a nuclear attack, and focused on rapid on-the-scene delivery of services when disasters struck.

Working with state and local agencies, Lee also gained congressional support to put new emphasis on training programs to prepare police officers, firefighters and other first-responders for natural disasters and emergencies. In the wake of the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, FEMA became central to a federal response plan for coordinating the work of federal agencies and of state and local emergency services.

Under the current Bush proposal, FEMA would become the Homeland Security Department's primary grant-giving agency for first-responders, with a new $3.5 billion kitty to be distributed to train and provide equipment to state and local agencies, police and firefighters.

FEMA's Office of National Preparedness, which is in the process of being formed to handle grant programs, would be consolidated with a Justice Department unit, the Office for Domestic Preparedness (ODP), with FEMA retaining control. The FEMA office was created after the Oklahoma City bombing to train and equip all first-responders around the country for dealing with potential terrorist attacks.

Having spent several years getting states to develop response programs before it would pass out major grants, the ODP is funded at a $1 billion level this fiscal year. That funding is scheduled to grow to $2 billion next year.

The new FEMA, as envisioned by the Bush plan, would become a $6 billion agency within the new Homeland Security Department but, as members of Congress quickly noted, its major interest would change. It would become primarily a national security grant-giver, trainer and coordinator for meeting terrorist threats rather than being the primary responder, supervising and distributing major disaster relief. "It would change to be primarily a preparedness agency," a congressional aide said. And, he added, "training for a terrorist attack is far different from training to meet national disasters."

FEMA Director Joe M. Allbaugh tried to reassure Congress earlier this year that the homeland security functions would not deter the agency from its traditional role. "I can assure members of this committee and the American people that we will not [take on homeland security] at the expense of another core duty: to help Americans prepare for and recover from natural disasters," he told a House appropriations subcommittee.

But some lawmakers have expressed concern that FEMA's natural disaster missions would lose out in a new department.

Under the Bush proposal, if the new homeland security secretary wants to focus on terrorist attacks, he could reduce "other [FEMA] missions and direct those resources entirely to security," Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska), chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said on July 19 before the House Select Committee on Homeland Security.

FEMA is "important not only in responding to disasters but in preventing and preparing for disasters of all types. . . . They play a key role in training firefighters. . . . They prepare flood plain maps and operate the flood insurance program," Young said.

Perhaps in response to Young and other members, select committee Chairman Richard K. Armey (R-Tex.) redrafted the Bush FEMA proposal. The Armey measure, scheduled for a vote by the full House on Thursday, would move FEMA to the new department but would keep it primarily an agency dealing with natural disasters. It would continue its natural disaster relief programs and, to a lesser extent, develop relief responses to terrorist attacks.

Armey's measure would put FEMA's Office of National Preparedness in the new department's border and transportation security division, where it would be merged with the Justice Department's Office for Domestic Preparedness. The proposed $3.5 billion first-responder grant program for states and local governments would be run separately from FEMA.

The White House plans to oppose the Armey version of the plan for FEMA. "FEMA has the best relationship with states and local people, and if people are trained for natural disasters or terrorist attacks, that's part of making things better," Gordon Johndroe, a spokesman for Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge, said yesterday. He added that the president's proposal "puts it in the most appropriate place, and we will continue to work with the Congress on this aspect of the bill."

The Senate bill, drafted by Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (D-Conn.), chairman of the Government Affairs Committee, is scheduled for markup today. The bill follows the Bush plan, except that it would separate FEMA from the preparedness office and its $3.5 billion grant fund.

Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman James M. Jeffords (I-Vt.) has asked that FEMA remain outside the new department, and other committee members are expected to offer amendments to that section of the bill.

Many outside groups support the president's plan for FEMA. The Aspen Institute's strategy group reported yesterday that the "foundation" of the nation's emergency response would come from the new department and "from incorporation of FEMA. . . . Cutting FEMA and emergency management out of the new department would cut the arms and legs off the body of the national strategy."

Witt, the former FEMA director, said moving "the entire agency into the new department will be a mistake." He said the reorganization of FEMA undertaken to beef up the Office of National Preparedness "has already taken many staff from the disaster response and recovery and mitigation directorates."

He suggested putting the preparedness office inside the new department, as Armey's bill would do, but leaving FEMA outside and making it the coordinator under a federal response plan "so that the secretary of homeland security could task it in the event of a terrorist attack."

Federal Emergency Management Agency

Mission

The agency is responsible for helping Americans prepare for, prevent, respond to and recover from natural or terrorist-caused disasters through training, insurance and relief programs.

History

FEMA can trace its past to 1803 when Congress provided aid to a New Hampshire town after a major fire. But its recent history stemmed from a 1979 executive order that merged into a new agency—FEMA—the various natural disaster agencies, along with the civil defense responsibilities of the Pentagon. FEMA has dealt with a wide variety of emergencies, from floods to the Cuban refugee invasion and the Three-Mile Island nuclear power plant accident.

Employees

About 2,500 employees with another 5,000 disaster reservists.

Fiscal 2002 budget

About $2 billion, of which $1.36 billion is for contingent funding of emergency disaster relief. Additional funds were provided to reimburse extraordinary expenses arising out of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

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