

Southeastern Tornado Outbreak: Brief Overview of FEMA Programs and Resources

Updated December 17, 2021

Introduction

A late-season tornado outbreak produced significant damage and numerous fatalities across portions of the southeastern United States and Ohio Valley from the evening of December 10 to the early morning of December 11, 2021. This Insight briefly overviews [emergency and major disaster declarations](#) and federal assistance programs relevant to those affected by the storm. It also provides selected Congressional Research Service (CRS) reports on federal emergency management policy.

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. signed an [emergency declaration](#) for [Kentucky](#) (December 11) under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (P.L. 93-288, as amended; [42 U.S.C. §§5121 et seq.](#)), to support state and local efforts to save lives, protect property, and avert the incident from becoming a major disaster. Under the declaration, [Public Assistance \(PA\)](#) for emergency protective measures is available for 16 counties. Subsequently, President Biden [declared a major disaster](#) for [Kentucky](#) (December 12), making available a broader range of federal assistance programs to state, local, and territorial governments, private nonprofit organizations, and individuals through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other federal agencies, including [PA for emergency work](#) (e.g., [debris removal](#) and [emergency protective measures](#)) and Individual Assistance (IA) for [fourteen counties](#). On December 15, President Biden [increased the federal cost share](#) for Public Assistance to 100% for debris removal and emergency protective measures, effective for thirty days from the date of the declaration. [The Hazard Mitigation Grant Program \(HMGP\)](#) is available throughout the entire commonwealth.

On December 13, 2021, President Biden approved emergency declarations authorizing PA emergency protective measures for nine counties in [Tennessee](#) and 13 counties in [Illinois](#).

Additional declarations for other states (or additional forms of assistance for existing declarations) may be forthcoming if the President determines that federal assistance is necessary to support state and local recovery. This information will be published in FEMA's [declaration database](#).

FEMA's [website](#) provides additional information on federal response efforts related to the [tornado outbreak](#).

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

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FEMA Emergency and Major Disaster Assistance

FEMA provides three major categories of assistance, some of which may be available pursuant to an emergency declaration and/or a major disaster declaration:

- *Public Assistance* (PA) provides grants and direct assistance to state, tribal, territorial, and local governments, and certain private nonprofit organizations, for emergency work (can be authorized pursuant to either an emergency or major disaster declaration), and permanent work (can only be authorized pursuant to a major disaster declaration).
- *Individual Assistance* (IA) provides financial and/or direct assistance to affected individuals and households, and can take the form of housing assistance and assistance for other needs (can be authorized pursuant to either an emergency or major disaster declaration), as well as crisis counseling, case management services, legal services, and disaster unemployment assistance (can only be authorized pursuant to a major disaster declaration).
- *Hazard Mitigation Assistance* (HMA) funds mitigation and resiliency projects and programs, typically across the entire state or territory. States which receive a major disaster declaration are awarded [Hazard Mitigation Grant Program](#) (HMGP) funding.

The forms of assistance authorized by a declaration may vary by the [designated areas](#), per the declaration (subject to amendment). The President can also amend emergency and major disaster declarations to decrease the [cost-share requirements](#) for PA.

Federal Funding for Disaster Response and Recovery

Typically, Congress also expresses interest in funding following a disaster declaration. FEMA's [Disaster Relief Fund](#) (DRF) is the primary source of federal government resources for response and recovery activities. It is often used as an indicator of the overall availability of federal resources for response and recovery.

As a result of historically high levels of annual and supplemental appropriations provided in recent fiscal years associated with Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) response, the balance in the DRF stood at more than \$40 billion in unobligated funds for major disasters before the tornadoes struck, more than a third of which was from the FY2022 continuing resolution. These resources are available to support the elements of the federal response and recovery effort authorized under the Stafford Act. DRF funds do not expire at the end of the fiscal year, and are to remain available until expended.

Additional Recovery Resources

FEMA Programs and Resources:

- [Public Assistance Program Overview](#)
- [Individual Assistance Program Overview](#)
- [Hazard Mitigation Grant Program Overview](#)
- [FEMA Blog](#)

CRS Resources

Tornado Resources

- CRS Report R46438, *Natural Disasters and Hazards: CRS Experts*
- CRS Report R44977, *Preliminary Damage Assessments for Major Disasters: Overview, Analysis, and Policy Observations*
- CRS Report R44941, *Disaster Debris Management: Requirements, Challenges, and Federal Agency Roles*

Federal Disaster Assistance—Process and Programs

- CRS Report WMR10001, *CRS Guide to Federal Emergency Management*
- CRS Report RL31734, *Federal Disaster Assistance Response and Recovery Programs: Brief Summaries*
- CRS Report R41981, *Congressional Primer on Responding to and Recovering from Major Disasters and Emergencies*, by Bruce R. Lindsay and Elizabeth M. Webster.
- CRS Report R46749, *FEMA's Public Assistance Program: A Primer and Considerations for Congress*, by Erica A. Lee
- CRS Report R46014, *FEMA Individual Assistance Programs: An Overview*
- CRS Insight IN11187, *Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Hazard Mitigation Assistance*
- CRS Report R45238, *FEMA and SBA Disaster Assistance for Individuals and Households: Application Processes, Determinations, and Appeals*
- CRS Report R43537, *FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund: Overview and Selected Issues*

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