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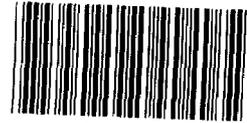
United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Resources, Community, and
Economic Development Division

B-252041

June 14, 1993

The Honorable Conrad Burns
United States Senate



149356

Dear Senator Burns:

Concerned about possible differences in the delivery of federal disaster assistance to rural areas in comparison with urban areas, you asked us in a letter dated January 27, 1993, to elaborate on our testimony on that date before the Senate Committee on Appropriations.¹ In response to your letter and subsequent discussions with your office, we agreed to give you our views on (1) whether there are differences in the way federal disaster assistance is provided to rural and urban areas; (2) whether, in terms of disaster response, the needs of a rural area like Montana with a low population density differ from those of an urban area; and (3) in the context of the 1988 fires in Yellowstone Park, what the role of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is in fighting forest fires.

While our past work has not specifically addressed the rural aspects of disaster response, this correspondence details those of our findings that are relevant to rural areas. During the course of the work that led to our January 1993 testimony, we visited Montana. After receiving your request, we discussed your specific concerns with emergency management personnel from Montana and from FEMA and obtained relevant documentation. As agreed with your office, we did not attempt to formulate conclusions or recommendations.

In brief, we found the following:

- The disaster assistance provided in rural areas is not significantly different from that provided in urban areas.

¹Disaster Management: Recent Disasters Demonstrate the Need to Improve the Nation's Response Strategy (GAO/T-RCED-93-4, Jan. 27, 1993).

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According to emergency management officials in Montana, state and local governments in rural areas do face added challenges because they have fewer resources of their own relative to the large geographic areas covered. However, federal assistance is available when state and local capacity is exceeded. Because state and local resources are sufficient in most cases and federal assistance is available when needed, Montana officials do not believe that overall response to rural disasters is a major problem under most scenarios they envision.

- Disaster response in rural areas places a greater burden on state and local emergency management personnel than it does in urban areas. State and local emergency management groups are likely to have to cover large geographic areas with fewer personnel and resources. As a result, Montana officials are concerned about having sufficient resources to prepare for disasters, in part because of the problem of providing the matching funds often required to obtain federal resources for preparedness. They further believe that one of the formulas for allocating federal assistance for preparedness does not sufficiently take into account the problems rural areas face. FEMA officials agree with this contention but say they are unlikely to change the formula because, while the current formula may favor heavily populated areas, that is where the threats and needs tend to be concentrated.
- FEMA would generally have little if any involvement in forest fires on federal lands such as those that occurred in Yellowstone Park unless the fire resulted in a presidential declaration of disaster. Forest fires on federal lands seldom result in such declarations and therefore are generally handled through the National Interagency Coordination Center at the Boise Interagency Fire Center in Idaho. The Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration participate in this center.

The following sections provide background information and a more detailed discussion of these issues.

BACKGROUND

State and local governments are primarily responsible for the initial response and subsequent recovery efforts in a disaster or emergency. Federal assistance is provided only

to supplement these efforts. Smaller disasters--such as incidents involving hazardous materials--occur frequently, but the federal government is generally not involved. However, under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (P.L. 93-288), the federal government can provide additional assistance to disaster victims. If the governor of a state certifies that state and local resources are not sufficient to respond to an event and the federal government agrees, the President can declare a major disaster. Federal assistance will then be provided, but only to fill the needs that cannot be met with state, local, and volunteer resources. Considerable federal assistance can also be provided without a presidential declaration, as described below. In addition, the federal government provides grants to enhance the preparedness of state and local governments for disasters.

Relief Assistance

Under the Stafford Act, federal aid in response to disasters normally consists of financial assistance, transportation to bring in needed supplies and equipment, and help in removing debris. Needed less frequently, but provided when necessary, are personnel, equipment such as generators, food, and water. Even when the President has not declared a major disaster, several types of federal assistance are available. A rural state like Montana might particularly benefit from these types of assistance. For example, disaster-related assistance can include

- search and rescue, victim evacuation, and transportation of supplies and equipment by the Department of Defense;
- money, equipment, supplies, and personnel for the suppression of forest or grassland fires on nonfederal lands from FEMA;
- emergency health and sanitation assistance from the Public Health Service;
- low-interest loans to homeowners and businesses from the Small Business Administration;
- loans to farmers and ranchers from the Farmers Home Administration; and
- assistance for up to 10 days from the Department of Defense to remove debris and restore essential public facilities and services.

Preparedness Assistance

In addition to disaster relief assistance, several programs are available through FEMA to enhance state and local governments' preparations to respond to natural disasters and other emergencies. Provided primarily under the Civil Defense Act of 1950, this assistance generally takes the form of financial grants. In most instances, states and local governments must match the funds provided. The grants are used, for example, to help pay the salaries of planners and other personnel, build and maintain centers from which to direct emergency operations, and purchase and maintain emergency communication systems. FEMA also provides guidance on what state and local governments should include in their disaster plans. These plans are reviewed by FEMA and/or the appropriate state government for completeness.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RURAL AND URBAN
FEDERAL DISASTER RELIEF ASSISTANCE

The same type of federal disaster relief assistance is generally needed by, and provided to, rural and urban areas. However, because people and property are concentrated in urban areas, the preponderance of disaster relief assistance goes to those areas.

In the past 10 years, few disasters of sufficient magnitude to warrant a presidential declaration of disaster have occurred in the less populous western states, apparently because disasters in these states generally affect fewer people and less property. In fiscal years 1983-92, out of 294 presidentially declared disasters, Montana, South Dakota, Utah, and New Mexico each had 2; North Dakota, Arizona, and Wyoming each had 1; and Idaho and Colorado had none. Montana's most recent presidentially declared disaster (for flooding) was in October 1986, and that required only \$1.4 million in assistance from FEMA.

Although rural disasters usually entail less loss of life and property and fewer presidential declarations of disaster, Montana and other rural areas face threats that are generally similar to those faced by urban areas. FEMA publication number 196² identifies the following as major threats to Montana: nuclear attack and tornadoes in central and eastern Montana; earthquakes in southern and western

²We provided relevant extracts from this document to your office during a March 31, 1993, briefing.

Montana; and snow, extreme cold, and flooding throughout most of the state. Montana officials are also concerned about incidents involving hazardous materials, particularly because the large geographic areas involved could hamper response.

We are still obtaining information from FEMA on the specific emergencies and disasters Montana has faced in recent years. As agreed with your office, we will provide you with that information as soon as we receive it from FEMA.

Montana officials said that no disaster in recent years has been beyond their response capabilities, but they pointed out that they have not faced a disaster of catastrophic magnitude. According to these officials, rural and "frontier" (extremely rural) areas have a greater-than-average shortage of generators and heavy equipment. However, these officials said that the Montana National Guard is capable, in most cases, of providing and transporting the needed materials into any disaster area. If damage were unusually widespread or severe, the U.S. military could be called upon to help. The officials also told us that many local jurisdictions are establishing mutual aid agreements between city and county governments and between jurisdictions that are contiguous.

DISASTER RESPONSE NEEDS IN MONTANA

Although Montana officials are confident of their ability to respond when needed, they are nonetheless concerned about preparedness and response capabilities in rural areas. County and local governments play an irreplaceable role in the initial response and subsequent recovery following disasters: They know best where the damage is, who owns the damaged property, and where the victims are. However, many rural communities must rely on small, often volunteer staffs for emergency planning and services. It is therefore often difficult for these communities to optimally perform or fund training, planning, and exercises and to pay for communication equipment. In Montana, for instance, approximately 44 out of 56 county emergency coordinators are part-time or volunteer workers.

Montana officials further believe that any preparedness and response deficiencies in rural and frontier areas are exacerbated by inequities they perceive in the way federal financial assistance is distributed. They are particularly concerned about two issues: (1) the difficulty Montana has in providing the matching funds frequently required to

obtain federal assistance and (2) the formula used to distribute much of the federal financial assistance, which they believe may not give sufficient weight to the unique needs and problems of rural and frontier areas.

Montana officials told us the state is sometimes unable to provide the matching funds often required to obtain federal assistance to enhance preparedness. In Montana, two emergency staff positions (in communications and accounting) were eliminated because the state could not provide the matching funds. One staff member qualified for another program and was retained, but the other staff member was terminated. Montana is also in jeopardy of losing a position in the earthquake program in October 1994 if the state cannot provide the matching funds.

Documents prepared by Montana's Disaster and Emergency Services Division point out some of the problems facing the state.³ Among other things, these documents discuss (1) the difficulties that arise when, for example, small police and fire departments must cover large areas and (2) the need to review the criteria for distributing federal funds to rural and frontier areas. According to one of the documents, the serious hazards, vulnerabilities, and risks that rural and frontier areas face are worsened by the diminished response and recovery capabilities inherent in sparsely populated but geographically large areas and a formula for allocating federal funds that unduly favors heavily populated areas.

We discussed the issue of fund allocation with officials at FEMA's headquarters and Denver Region (the latter provides technical and other assistance to state and local emergency management officials in Montana). These officials agree with the contention of Montana emergency management officials that the formula used for one FEMA program--a program that accounts for over 60 percent of all civil defense assistance to state and local governments--is weighted towards heavily populated areas. However, a cognizant FEMA headquarters official stated that emergency programs are underfunded in all areas of the nation,

³Beyond Rural: The Montana Frontier Thesis and Hazardous Materials Risk Management in Extremely Rural (Frontier) Areas. Both documents were prepared by Frederick J. Cowie, Ph.D., Emergency Management Specialist, Montana Disaster and Emergency Services Division, Helena, Montana. We provided these documents to your office on March 31, 1993.

regardless of population density. In this official's view, threats and disasters tend to occur where population is concentrated. As a result, FEMA has no current plans to change the formula.

Under the formula, three factors are used to allocate funds to the states. The first factor is state population: One-third of the total funds are distributed among the states in proportion to their populations. Under the second factor, 15 percent of the total funds are divided equally among all states, irrespective of population or any other criterion. The third factor, affecting 50 percent of the total funds, considers the amount of money each state received in the previous year.

Montana and FEMA officials agree that rural and frontier areas may receive fewer funds than more populous areas, yet Montana receives considerably more money per capita than many other states. In fiscal year 1992, Montana, with a population of 808,000, received \$551,315, or \$0.68 per capita. In comparison, the state of Washington received \$0.23 per capita (\$1.1 million) and California received \$0.17 per capita (\$5.1 million).

While funds for disaster preparedness are extremely restricted in both heavily and sparsely populated areas, FEMA is attempting to ease the problem by giving the states and communities greater flexibility in how they use the funds. FEMA's fiscal year 1994 budget proposal would considerably relax the requirements on how the funds may be used.⁴ Unfortunately, the 1994 budget also reduces the total amount available to the states and communities through civil defense programs by 12 percent, from \$109 million in 1993 to \$96 million in 1994. Furthermore, the budget proposes an increase in the amount of nonfederal matching funds the states would be required to supply. As noted above, matching funds are a problem in Montana even at current levels.

⁴This approach corresponds with a recommendation we made in our January 27, 1993, testimony. As you may recall, we testified that the state and local emergency managers we spoke to were concerned with the strict limitations placed on the use of civil defense funds.

FEMA'S ROLE IN ASSISTANCE WITH FOREST FIRES

You also specifically requested information about how FEMA might have addressed the 1988 wildfires in Yellowstone Park. GAO reviewed the federal response to these fires, but primarily in terms of examining the policy then in effect of generally allowing fires started by lightning to burn. Copies of our report⁵ and video⁶ on the subject have already been provided to your office.

FEMA generally has little if any involvement in forest fires on federal lands. Such fires are usually handled--without a presidential disaster declaration or FEMA involvement--by the agency that manages the land, such as the Forest Service or Park Service, in coordination with the National Interagency Coordination Center at the Boise Interagency Fire Center. This interagency center operates with the participation of the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

FEMA is authorized by law to provide fire suppression assistance on nonfederal lands, either with or without a presidential declaration that a major disaster has occurred. Oregon, Washington, Alaska, South Dakota, and Colorado have been the primary recipients of such assistance in recent years. According to FEMA, while the federal government can provide equipment, supplies, and personnel in addition to financial assistance, state and local firefighting resources are generally adequate to deal with the fires. Thus, federal contributions are usually limited to financial assistance to help cover the cost of fighting the fire.

If there were a presidential declaration of disaster concerning fires on federal lands, FEMA would be considered the focal federal agency. Nevertheless, under the Federal

⁵Federal Fire Management: Limited Progress in Restarting the Prescribed Fire Program (GAO/RCED-91-42, Dec. 5, 1990).

⁶Federal Fire Management: Evaluation of Changes Made After Yellowstone (GAO/RCED-90-01VR, May 24, 1990).

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Response Plan,⁷ the Forest Service is designated as the lead federal agency for "the detection and suppression of fires on Federal lands, and providing personnel, equipment, and supplies in support of State and local agencies involved in rural and urban firefighting operations." The Forest Service has considerable resources and a mobilization and command structure to deal with fires. FEMA's role would primarily be to coordinate the multiagency response and obtain additional resources if the agencies should need them.

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If you have additional questions regarding these issues, please contact me at (202) 512-7631. Major contributors to this correspondence were Stan Czerwinski, Paul Bryant, and Signora James May.

Sincerely yours,



Judy A. England-Joseph
Director, Housing and Community
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⁷The Federal Response Plan is an interagency plan that establishes the basis for providing federal assistance to states and local governments affected by significant disasters. The plan sets forth the basic responsibilities, structures, and mechanisms under which 27 agencies will mobilize their resources and conduct activities to augment the response efforts of states and local governments.