



Highlights of [GAO-07-835T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

As a new hurricane season approaches, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) faces the simultaneous challenges of preparing for the season and implementing the reorganization and other provisions of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006. The Act stipulates major changes to FEMA intended to enhance its preparedness for and response to catastrophic and major disasters. As GAO has reported, FEMA and DHS face continued challenges, including clearly defining leadership roles and responsibilities, developing necessary disaster response capabilities, and establishing accountability systems to provide effective services while protecting against waste, fraud, and abuse. This testimony (1) summarizes GAO's findings on these challenges and FEMA's and DHS's efforts to address them; and (2) discusses several disaster management issues for continued congressional attention.

What GAO Recommends

This testimony includes no new recommendations, but identifies issues to which Congress, FEMA, and DHS may wish to give continued attention so that FEMA may fulfill the requirements of the Post-Katrina Reform Act. These issues are based on the findings and recommendations of more than 30 Katrina-related GAO reports.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-835T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact William Jenkins, Jr. at (202) 512-8777 or jenkinswo@gao.gov.

HOMELAND SECURITY

Observations on DHS and FEMA Efforts to Prepare for and Respond to Major and Catastrophic Disasters and Address Related Recommendations and Legislation

What GAO Found

Effective disaster preparedness and response require defining what needs to be done, where and by whom, how it needs to be done, and how well it should be done. GAO analysis following Hurricane Katrina showed that improvements were needed in leadership roles and responsibilities, development of the necessary disaster capabilities, and accountability systems that balance the need for fast, flexible response against the need to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse. To facilitate rapid and effective decision making, legal authorities, roles and responsibilities, and lines of authority at all government levels must be clearly defined, effectively communicated, and well understood. Adequacy of capabilities in the context of a catastrophic or major disaster are needed—particularly in the areas of (1) situational assessment and awareness; (2) emergency communications; (3) evacuations; (4) search and rescue; (5) logistics; and (6) mass care and shelter. Implementing controls and accountability mechanisms helps to ensure the proper use of resources. FEMA has initiated reviews and some actions in each of these areas, but their operational impact in a catastrophic or major disaster has not yet been tested. Some of the targeted improvements, such as a completely revamped logistics system, are multiyear efforts. Others, such as the ability to field mobile communications and registration-assistance vehicles, are expected to be ready for the coming hurricane season.

The Comptroller General has suggested one area for fundamental reform and oversight is ensuring a strategic and integrated approach to prepare for, respond to, recover, and rebuild after catastrophic events. FEMA enters the 2007 hurricane season as an organization in transition working simultaneously to implement the reorganization required by the Post-Katrina Reform Act and moving forward on initiatives to address the deficiencies identified by the post-Katrina reviews. This is an enormous challenge. In the short-term, Congress may wish to consider several specific areas for immediate oversight. These include (1) evaluating the development and implementation of the National Preparedness System, including preparedness for natural disasters, terrorist incidents, and an influenza pandemic; (2) assessing state and local capabilities and the use of federal grants to enhance those capabilities; (3) examining regional and multi-state planning and preparation; (4) determining the status and use of preparedness exercises; and (5) examining DHS policies regarding oversight assistance.