



Defunding, Dismantling, and Disarray:

How the Trump Administration's Changes to FEMA in 2025 Made Appalachian Communities More Vulnerable to Disaster

By Anastasia Harouse and Dana Kuhnline | Released: May 14, 2026

Executive Summary

In Appalachia, increasing flooding poses serious threats to the livelihoods of everyday people and communities due to the intensity and frequency of these disasters. Between 2015 and 2025 alone, Appalachia experienced 44 presidentially declared flooding disasters.¹

After decades of underinvestment in the region, small Appalachian communities struggle to adequately respond to natural disasters. Increasing disaster risks and the limited capacity of small local governments, mean that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) plays a crucial role in supporting state and local governments' disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.

Despite FEMA's critical role, the agency underwent changes throughout 2025 driven by the Trump administration's policy goals of dismantling federal bureaucracy, reducing spending, and shifting more funding responsibilities to state and local governments. These policy shifts had negative consequences, including delayed disaster responses, increased politicization of disaster funds, the destabilization of FEMA's internal structure, and lengthy legal battles. The cancellation² of the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program is included in this report as a case study for FEMA's changes and their impacts in 2025.

This report draws on a variety of sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Federal Emergency Management Agency in 2025, including news sources, official FEMA documents, research reports, [USASpending.Gov](#), and the [FEMA BRIC Obligations Dashboard](#). Ultimately, our report illustrates FEMA's indispensable role and demonstrates how recent administrative changes heightened community vulnerability in the face of escalating natural disasters.

¹ Dennis et al., "Where the Sky Keeps Bursting."

² The BRIC program was reinstated in March 2026 following a federal court order.

Key Findings

- In Appalachia, the threat of flooding is severe and increasing. Between 2015 and 2025, the region experienced 44 presidentially declared natural disasters. Climate change is increasing the risk and severity of these events because warmer air holds more moisture, leading to extreme rainfall. Since 2000, these disasters have claimed over 300 lives in Appalachia.
- Because of the region's limited local capacity, FEMA provides critical financial support. Between 2020 and 2025, FEMA obligated \$5.9 billion in grants to Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia³. Without this federal funding, a major disaster year could drain over 24% of West Virginia's and 15% of Kentucky's state reserve funds, threatening the economic stability of the entire region.
- Throughout 2025, the Trump administration actively downsized FEMA's footprint, shifting funding responsibilities to state governments. These changes led to a sharp decline in funding and a loss of stability within the agency. Between January and June 2025 alone, FEMA lost 2,446 active employees, including 24 senior executives, resulting in a massive loss of institutional knowledge.
- The restructuring of the agency also led to significant operational delays and the politicization of aid. The average time to respond to disaster requests jumped from 32 days under the Biden administration to 57.6 days under the Trump administration. Furthermore, data suggest that disaster declarations were sometimes delayed or denied due to state-level political leadership. For states with a Democrat governor and Democrat senators, President Trump approved only 23% of disaster funding requests, but for Republican-led states, he approved 89% of their requests.
- The cancellation of the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program serves as a key example of these harmful changes. FEMA obligated a total \$94.9 million across Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia for essential pre-disaster mitigation projects. Despite these obligations representing historic levels of infrastructure investment, they accounted for only 11% of the region's demand. The administration's attempt to rescind \$882 million in BRIC funding nationwide further jeopardized disaster resiliency efforts, leaving small communities more vulnerable to natural disasters at a time when they needed support most.

Introduction

Flooding has devastated Appalachian communities over the past few decades, claiming the lives of 300 people in the region since 2000.⁴ The scale of the disasters is clear: between 2015 and 2025 alone, Appalachia was hit by 44 presidentially declared flooding disasters.⁵

Small, rural Appalachian communities are especially at risk. These areas have faced decades of infrastructure underinvestment, weakening their ability to withstand extreme weather. Meanwhile, the mountainous terrain and the proximity of many communities to rivers and streams make these places uniquely vulnerable to the consequences of flooding.⁶

³ From USASpending.Gov, "Grants" includes all four federal grant award types: Project Grants, Formula Grants, Block Grants, and Cooperative Agreements obligated by FEMA to the states.

⁴ Dennis et al., "Where the Sky Keeps Bursting."

⁵ Arriens, *Hurricane Helene Highlights Appalachia's Rising Flood Risk*.

⁶ Pacific Institute, *Climate Change and Flooding in Central Appalachia*.

Climate change is only intensifying the frequency, severity, and risk of catastrophic flooding. As temperatures rise, the atmosphere holds more moisture, leading to heavier rainfall. This affects Appalachia because the region is located under particularly moist atmospheric conditions.⁷

While dozens of communities across Appalachia have faced similar impacts from repeated flooding, the work of immediate disaster relief after a flood, as well as the long road to rebuilding, can be isolating. To help address this isolation, the [Appalachian Flood Resilience Coalition](#) was formed to gather recommendations from flood-impacted communities across the region on how to improve flood resiliency. The Coalition works to support and elevate regional and national solutions identified by local leaders. This Coalition uses various avenues to advance its mission to enhance regional collaboration and support the policy changes needed to build a more flood-resilient region, including advocating for critical investments through federal legislation. Programs highlighted as priorities for continued funding include⁸:

- Specific FEMA programs, including FEMA’s Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) program, FEMA’s Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program, and FEMA’s Flood Hazard Mapping and Risk Analysis program.
- The U.S. Geological Survey’s (USGS) Federal Priority Streamgage (FPS) network, as well as the USGS Cooperative Matching Funds program, to improve data on regional flood patterns and to create more accurate warnings for rising floodwaters.
- The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and The National Weather Service (NWS) which provide weather forecasting and atmospheric and climate research essential for communities to prepare and adapt to extreme weather.
- The Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement’s (OSMRE) Appalachian Regional Reforestation Initiative for reforestation of former mine lands and mine reclamation; these practices can reduce flood impacts to nearby communities.
- The US Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Emergency Watershed Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, as healthy soils act as a sponge to both retain more water in drought situations and absorb more water in flooding scenarios.

These priorities underscore the importance of the interconnected web of federal agencies that must be part of comprehensive flood resilience solutions for Appalachia; these agencies have all faced turmoil and barriers to fulfilling their mission because of the Trump administration’s changes. This report focuses on the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) because of its primary mission in “helping people before, during, and after disasters.”⁹

⁷ Dennis et al., “Where the Sky Keeps Bursting.”

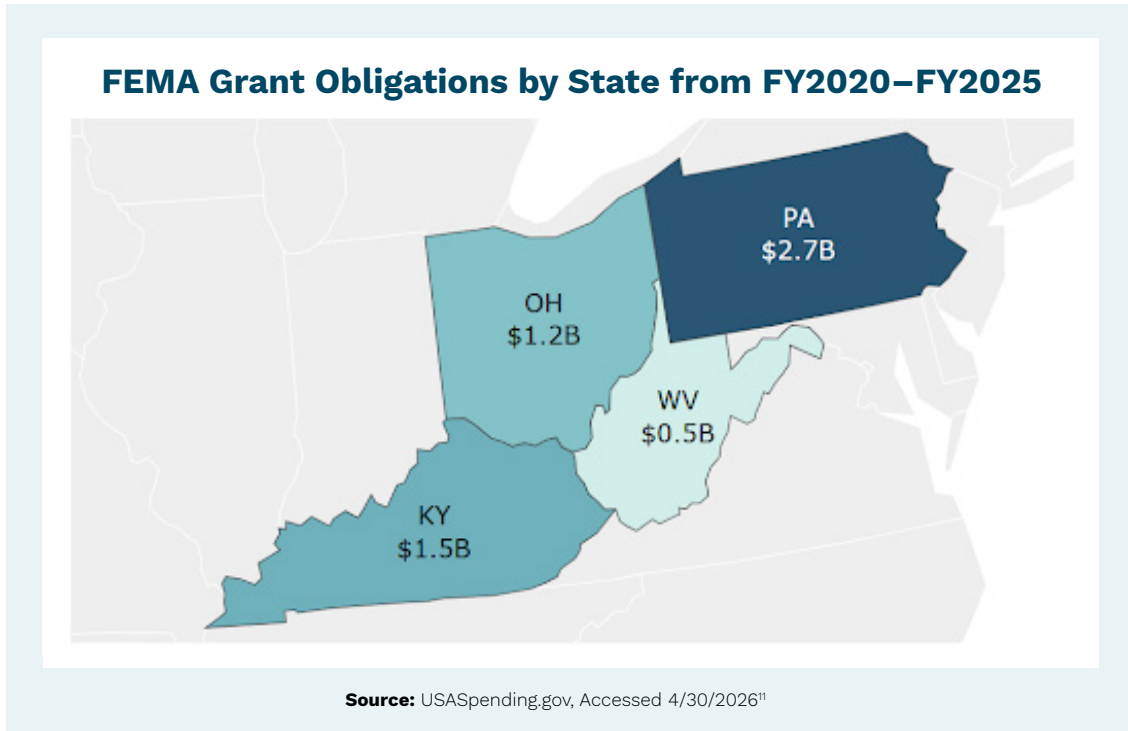
⁸ Miles, “Appalachian Leaders Urge Congress to Back Investments.”

⁹ Federal Emergency Management Agency, “About Us.”

FEMA's Funding Footprint in Appalachia

The Federal Emergency Management Agency provides essential financial support to the Appalachian region for disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. From 2020 to 2025, **FEMA obligated a total of \$5.9 billion in grants** to Ohio, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania. This funding supports a variety of programs that promote climate resiliency, provide post-disaster relief, and strengthen local infrastructure.¹⁰

Figure 1



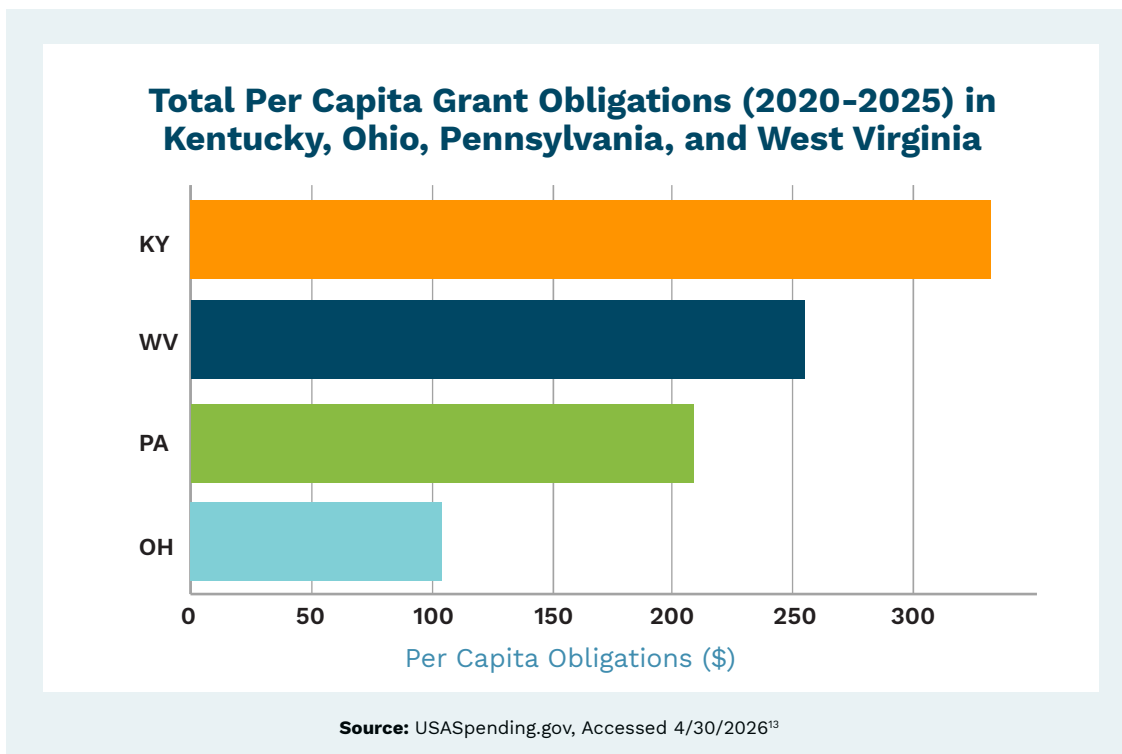
Pennsylvania has the highest total grant obligations (Figure 1), but after normalizing for population, Kentucky and West Virginia have higher per-resident FEMA grants. This indicates a greater reliance on federal support for disaster response, recovery, and preparedness in Kentucky and West Virginia, compared to Pennsylvania and Ohio. (Figure 2).¹²

10 U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Advanced Search."

11 U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Advanced Search."

12 U.S. Census Bureau, "Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics"; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Advanced Search."

Figure 2



An analysis by the Pew Charitable Trusts further reveals how some states depend more on FEMA funding, relative to other states, because of their limited capacity and higher risks from disasters. The Pew Charitable Trusts compared each state’s historical peak-spending year to its 2024 reserve balance. This captures the “worst-case-scenario” year and puts it in context with the 2024 state’s reserves.¹⁴

For many states, the highest aid years are equal to a significant portion of the state’s reserve balance. In West Virginia, the highest year of federal aid they received would have cost 24% of the state’s reserves without federal support (Table 1), compared to 5% in Pennsylvania.¹⁵

State reserves, often called rainy day funds, are surplus revenues set aside by state governments to create a buffer for unexpected expenses such as economic downturns, revenue shortfalls, or natural disasters. However, the repeated natural disasters that the region has seen in recent years would quickly deplete state budgets; federal support is essential to address the scale of these increased disasters.

¹³ U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Advanced Search.”
¹⁴ Pew Charitable Trusts, *What Waning Federal Disaster Aid Would Mean*.
¹⁵ Pew Charitable Trusts, *What Waning Federal Disaster Aid Would Mean*.

Table 1

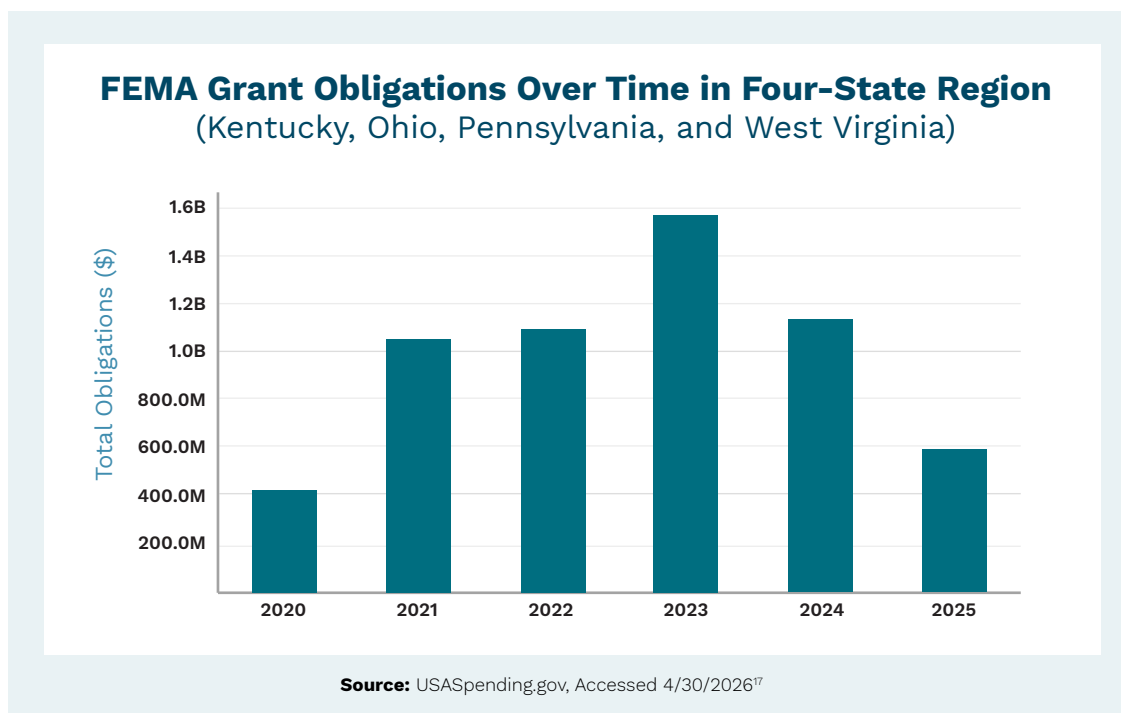
Highest Single-Year Aid Compared to the State's Total Reserve Balance	
STATE	HIGHEST SINGLE-YEAR AID / TOTAL RESERVE BALANCE (2024)
West Virginia	24.2%
Kentucky	15.5%
Ohio	5.6%
Pennsylvania	5.0%

Source: Pew Charitable Trust¹⁶

When states experience natural disasters, they face increased financial needs that exceed their capacity to prepare for and respond adequately. State governments need continued stability in FEMA funding distribution for state and local budget solvency.

Unfortunately, this continued stability of FEMA funding is not present in the data. Instead, a pattern of declining federal support has emerged. Consistent with our previous [Federal Funding Flatline report](#), FEMA grant obligations peaked under the Biden administration but then fell sharply after intentional cutbacks by the Trump administration (Figure 3).

Figure 3



16 Pew Charitable Trusts, What Waning Federal Disaster Aid Would Mean.
 17 U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Advanced Search."

Ultimately, FEMA's funding is a lifeline for Appalachian states with limited resources, but the current trajectory of declining grant funding leaves these areas increasingly vulnerable during natural disasters. This decline was not a budgetary accident; it was a direct result of institutional shifts mandated throughout 2025.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in Review: 2025

Overview

President Trump's inauguration heralded a year of rapid changes. On his first day in office, Trump created the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to implement his agenda of downsizing the federal government.¹⁸ Under Elon Musk's leadership, DOGE haphazardly reduced the federal workforce as part of its attempts to cut spending. As a result, these actions hampered many agencies' ability to fulfill their duties. Despite FEMA's critical role, it was a target for significant changes.

From the beginning of 2025, the Trump administration clearly communicated its desire to drastically overhaul FEMA. At the start of the year, Trump proposed entirely dismantling FEMA.¹⁹ Although his administration did not eliminate it, Trump convened a special council to critically review the agency.²⁰ Under former Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem, FEMA was guided by a leader aligned with Trump's goal to "dismantle the government bureaucracy."²¹ Trump's objective resulted in attempts to end grant programs, claw back obligated funds, and create barriers to accessing support.

The following timeline details key administrative, legislative, and legal milestones from 2025 that catalyzed FEMA's precarious state in 2026.

¹⁸ Fowler and Bond, "DOGE in Trump's First 100 Days."

¹⁹ Gangitano, "Trump Teases Executive Order Nixing FEMA."

²⁰ Exec. Order No. 14180.

²¹ Fowler and Bond, "DOGE in Trump's First 100 Days."

TIMELINE OF TRUMP ADMINISTRATION FEMA SETBACKS (2025)

	POLICY	IMPACT
Jan 20	President Trump issues Executive Order 14159: “ Protecting the American People Against Invasion ” to withhold federal funding from sanctuary jurisdictions. ²²	The EO leverages federal assistance to force states to comply with its immigration agenda. FEMA funds may not be granted freely, depending on a state’s immigration agenda.
Jan 24	Trump issues Executive Order 14180: “ Council to Assess the Federal Emergency Management Agency .” ²³	The order mandates a council to conduct research and propose changes to FEMA. It signals the administration’s intention to “drastically” change the agency’s current structure.
Feb 26	Politico reports a leaked memo that directs the agency to remove phrases referencing climate change and equity. ²⁴	The document forbids words such as “climate,” “green,” “carbon footprint,” “climate resilience,” and “inclusion,” indicating that FEMA will no longer consider these topics in its policies and projects.
Mar 19	President Trump issues Executive Order 14239: “Achieving Efficiency Through State and Local Preparedness.” ²⁵	While signaling a shift toward state and local leadership in disaster response, the order primarily serves as a directive for the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and the Department of Homeland Security to review and revise policies on critical infrastructure, national continuity, and disaster preparedness and response.
Mar 25	FEMA announces it will no longer enforce the Federal Flood Risk Management Standard Policy. ²⁶	Originally, the policy required federally funded flood projects and significant repairs to meet higher elevation and resiliency standards. ²⁷ Without enforcement, projects are vulnerable to repeating past disasters and will incur higher repair costs in the long run.
Mar 25	President Trump issues Executive Order 14247: “Modernizing Payments To and From America’s Bank Account,” which eliminates paper-based transactions with the U.S. General Fund. ²⁸	This EO creates additional barriers for individuals lacking reliable internet access, a relatively common issue in rural Appalachia. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, 18.8% of households in the region lack broadband access. ²⁹ Without physical checks, these families face significant hurdles in accessing FEMA or disaster recovery funds during future emergencies.
Mar 27	DHS issues Fiscal Year 2025 Standard Terms and Conditions, incorporating new requirements regarding grant recipients’ immigration policies and DEI programs. ³⁰	The update formalizes specific compliance benchmarks that local communities must meet to access FEMA funding. This move significantly increases the administrative and political criteria for securing federal disaster grants.
Apr 4	FEMA announces it will terminate the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program. ³¹	The administration intended to rescind \$882 million previously allocated for hazard mitigation which would have lessened the impact of future disasters.

22 Exec. Order No. 14159.

23 Exec. Order No. 14180.

24 Frank, “FEMA Memo: Replace ‘Noncitizen.’”

25 Exec. Order No. 14239.

26 Federal Emergency Management Agency, “FEMA Eases Floodplain Requirements.”

27 Association of State Floodplain Managers, *FEMA Halts Rule That Protects Against Future Floods*.

28 Exec. Order No. 14247.

29 Appalachian Regional Commission, *Computer and Broadband Access in Appalachia*.

30 Department of Homeland Security, “FY2025 DHS Standard Terms and Conditions.”

31 Federal Emergency Management Agency, *FEMA Ends Wasteful Grant Program*.

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<p>May 8 The Trump-appointed FEMA Acting Administrator, Cameron Hamilton, is dismissed after his congressional testimony supporting FEMA.³²</p>	<p>This departure indicated political tension within the agency. In a later interview, Hamilton recounted a “hostile relationship” between DHS officials and himself during his tenure.³³ Hamilton was replaced by the Assistant Secretary at the DHS’s Office for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction, David Richardson.³⁴</p>
<p>May 13 A coalition of 20 states files <i>State of Illinois et al. v. Federal Emergency Management Agency et al.</i>³⁵</p>	<p>The states legally challenged the Trump administration’s decision to withhold funding for immigration “sanctuary jurisdictions.”</p>
<p>May 20 The FEMA Review Council convened for the first time, establishing a report deadline of December 11.³⁶</p>	<p>The committee’s partisan composition and its intention to fundamentally restructure FEMA underscored the significant shift in the agency’s direction in 2025.</p>
<p>Jun 18 Secretary Noem requires every contract or grant over \$100,000 to be personally reviewed by her.³⁷</p>	<p>This policy introduced an administrative bottleneck in the funding process. Officials within FEMA warned that this action could slow response times during disasters.</p>
<p>Jul 16 Twenty states file <i>State of Washington v. Federal Emergency Management Agency</i>.³⁸</p>	<p>This legal action aims to block the cancellation of the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program.</p>
<p>Jul 23 The FEMA Act of 2025 is introduced in the House of Representatives.³⁹</p>	<p>It would increase FEMA’s independence from DHS and improve the delivery of post-disaster assistance. It reflects a different philosophy for the agency’s future than the Trump administration’s vision.⁴⁰</p>
<p>Aug 20 FEMA requires disaster survivors to have an email address to receive individual assistance.⁴¹</p>	<p>This policy further limits aid to vulnerable individuals who may lack internet access or struggle to use technology.</p>
<p>Sept 3 The FEMA Act of 2025 passes through the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure with a bipartisan 57-3 vote.⁴²</p>	<p>This legislative action illustrates bipartisan Congressional support for FEMA reforms that strengthen the agency, not its total deconstruction.</p>
<p>Sept 24 A U.S. District Court judge grants a motion for summary judgment in the <i>State of Illinois v. Federal Emergency Management Agency</i>.⁴³</p>	<p>The judge ruled that FEMA’s decision to withhold funding from states that do not comply with its immigration agenda was illegal. The ruling ordered FEMA to restore funding to previous levels, before the reduction based on immigration policy. FEMA appealed the ruling on November 21, 2025, but the ruling currently protects billions of dollars in state funding. The appeal is still pending as of the report publication on May 1, 2026.</p>

32 Flavelle, “Leader of FEMA Dismissed.”

33 Frank, “FEMA Chief Recounts ‘Hostile Relationship.’”

34 Flavelle, “Leader of FEMA Dismissed.”

35 *State of Illinois v. Federal Emergency Management Agency*.

36 U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “FEMA Review Council: Meeting Minutes.”

37 Cohen, “Noem Demands More Control Over Funding.”

38 *State of Washington v. Federal Emergency Management Agency*.

39 FEMA Act of 2025.

40 National Association of Counties, *FEMA Act: Advocacy Toolkit*.

41 Taft, “FEMA Requires Disaster Victims Have Email Address.”

42 FEMA Act of 2025.

43 *State of Illinois v. Federal Emergency Management Agency*.

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<p>Sept 29 Eleven states sue DHS and FEMA, after substantial decreases in funding for the Homeland Security Grant Program and the Emergency Management Performance Grant Program in the State of Illinois v. Noem.⁴⁴</p>	<p>The states claim that FEMA decreased funding decisions because the states refused to use their local law enforcement to assist with federal immigration enforcement.</p>
<p>Sept 30 FEMA releases Emergency Management Performance Grant and Homeland Security Grant Program funding award notices, containing shortened performance periods and adding requirements for States to certify their population.⁴⁵</p>	<p>The award notice attempts to limit the scope of projects eligible for funding by imposing shorter performance periods. The population certification also serves as a bureaucratic hurdle to states' access to funding.</p>
<p>Oct 1 Congress begins the longest government shutdown in U.S. history, spanning 43 days.⁴⁶</p>	<p>FEMA employees do not receive a paycheck during this time, and 3,950 employees are furloughed.⁴⁷ "Nonessential" programs are suspended in the shutdown, and authorization for the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) expired without an extension, restricting the ability to issue or renew policies.⁴⁸ This program was implemented to provide government-backed flood insurance to communities that opt in to implement national flood management standards.⁴⁹ Without the NFIP, homebuyers must enter the private flood insurance market, which is often more costly to consumers, more likely to deny coverage, and less accountable to the public during disasters.⁵⁰ Consumers must agree to less favorable terms or stall real estate purchases in flood-prone regions.</p>
<p>Nov 4 Twelve states file State of Michigan v. Noem, alleging that the Trump Administration violated the Administrative Procedure Act through its September 30 grant rule changes.⁵¹</p>	<p>The lawsuit challenges the shortened performance periods and the new population certification requirements. The states argue that the administration is unlawfully creating administrative barriers to withhold funds, exceeding the executive branch's authority.</p>
<p>Nov 17 FEMA Acting Chief David Richardson resigns.⁵²</p>	<p>He was succeeded by FEMA Chief of Staff Karen Evans, who was the third Acting Chief of FEMA for 2025. Richardson was highly criticized for his nonresponsiveness after the Central Texas Flooding that devastated a girls' summer camp in July 2025.</p>
<p>Dec 11 The FEMA Review Council cancels its highly anticipated report release without providing a reason for the cancellation.⁵³</p>	<p>The absence of these findings leaves the agency's long-term plans undefined, creating uncertainty for state and local disaster mitigation efforts.</p>
<p>Dec 11 A federal judge rules in favor of the states in the State of Washington v. Federal Emergency Management Agency⁵⁴</p>	<p>This reverses the termination of the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities Program and orders the release of the funds. In March 2026, the court granted the plaintiffs' motion to enforce the judgment, finding that FEMA had not taken</p>

44 State of Illinois v. Noem.

45 State of Michigan v. Noem.

46 Treisman, "Government Shutdown Now Longest in U.S. History."

47 Porter and Patton, "Impact of Shutdown on Disaster Response."

48 Allen, "For Private Flood Insurance Companies, Government Shutdown Good for Business."

49 Federal Emergency Management Agency, "Community Status Book."

50 Allen, "For Private Flood Insurance Companies, Government Shutdown Good for Business."

51 State of Michigan v. Noem.

52 Associated Press, "FEMA Chief David Richardson Departs."

53 Aoun Anguiera, "Meeting to Launch FEMA Reforms Canceled."

54 State of Washington v. Federal Emergency Management Agency.

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	substantial steps to comply with the order. The case remains ongoing as of May 1, 2026, as reflected in subsequent FEMA's status reports, ensuring the agency's compliance. ⁵⁵
<p>Dec 22 A federal judge rules that the Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP) and Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG) allocations in the State of Illinois v. Noem were unlawful.⁵⁶</p>	<p>The court orders that the original funding levels be restored and strikes down the immigration compliance requirements. The judge notes that shifting funding “based solely on what appear to be Defendants’ political whims is unconscionable and, at least here, unlawful.” This ruling halts the administration’s attempt to use emergency preparedness grants as leverage for immigration enforcement. On February 20, 2026, FEMA filed an appeal, and this case is still ongoing as of May 1, 2026.</p>
<p>Dec 23 States gain another legal victory against the Trump Administration, as a federal district judge ruled in favor of the states in the State of Michigan v. Noem.⁵⁷</p>	<p>The court found that the shortened performance periods and population certification requirements for the Homeland Security Grant Program and Emergency Management Performance Grant Program were illegal. On February 20, 2026, the Trump administration filed an appeal, and the case remains ongoing as of May 1, 2026.</p>

Impact

In 2025, FEMA's changes severely limited its ability to provide aid in the wake of natural disasters. Some communities were vulnerable due to restructuring that slowed federal disaster response, and others were affected by the political withholding of funds. These challenges were further intensified by substantial workforce reductions that diminished FEMA's operational expertise and capacity. Although some policy changes were challenged in court, the resulting legal battles took months to resolve, meaning that even the judicial system did not provide speedy recourse.

Delayed Disaster Responses

In July 2025, one of the deadliest floods in American history hit Texas, claiming the lives of 137 Texans.⁵⁸ Despite the severe impacts, FEMA was slow to respond. Noem's mandate requiring her approval of all contracts over \$100,000 created an administrative bottleneck in the disaster assistance process. Multiple assistance-line call center contracts expired during the flooding, yet it took days for them to be approved because of Noem's new rule. This delay left many individuals unable to reach FEMA for help. Overall, FEMA answered only 1/3 of helpline calls. On busier days, the response rate fell to 15.9%, with only 2,613 of 16,419 calls answered on July 7th. Thousands of people waited as Noem took five days to approve the call center contract.⁵⁹

The delayed response in Texas is consistent with a broader pattern under the Trump administration, as

⁵⁵ Office of the Attorney General, "AG Brown Asks Court Enforce Order."

⁵⁶ *State of Illinois v. Noem*.

⁵⁷ *State of Michigan v. Noem*.

⁵⁸ Brooks, "Texas Lawmakers Investigate Flash Floods."

⁵⁹ Joselow, "FEMA Didn't Answer Class From Flood Survivors."

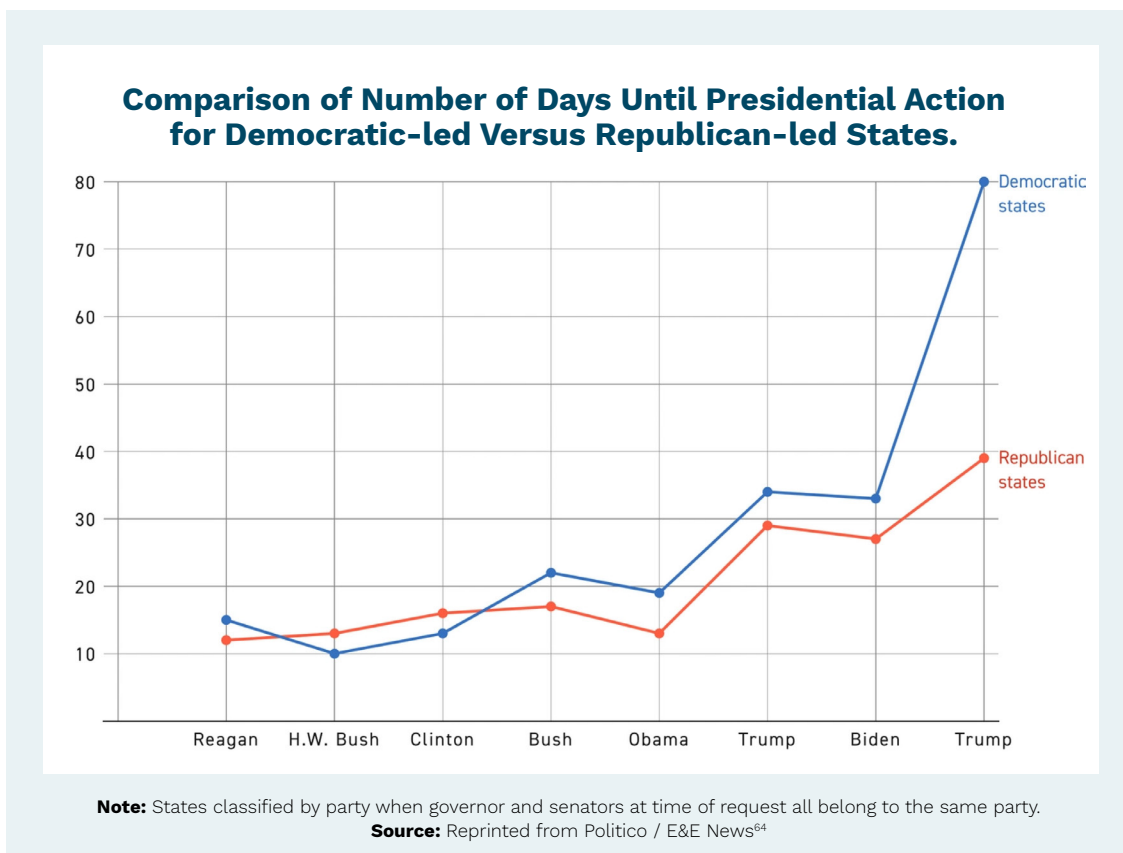
supported by metrics in the disaster declaration process. To receive major disaster support, after determining that the damage from a disaster exceeds state or tribal resources, the state or tribal leader must submit a request for a disaster declaration through their regional FEMA office.⁶⁰

Since the Stafford Act was signed into law in 1988, the president has had sole authority to either approve or deny these requests. Without the president’s approval, federal disaster assistance funds can not be released. The time period between a state or tribe’s request and the president’s decision is a critical waiting period, where each day is a day without support.⁶¹

While the formal process for requesting disaster declarations has not changed, under the second Trump administration, we have seen marked changes in how the administration processes those requests. Analyses of FEMA’s records show that the Trump administration had the slowest average disaster response timeline of any president, measured by the number of days from a state’s request to its denial or approval. On average, President Trump took 57.6 days to respond to major disaster requests, compared to Biden’s average of 32.2 days.⁶²

As shown in Figure 4, Trump’s number of days to respond varied by state political leadership. These trends highlight intensifying partisanship in the FEMA disaster declaration process.⁶³

Figure 4



60 Federal Emergency Management Agency, “How a Disaster Gets Declared.”

61 Federal Emergency Management Agency, “How a Disaster Gets Declared.”

62 Federal Emergency Management Agency, “Declaration Denials”; Federal Emergency Management Agency, “FEMA Web Disaster Declarations.”

63 Frank, “Harder for Blue States to Get Disaster Funding Under Trump.”

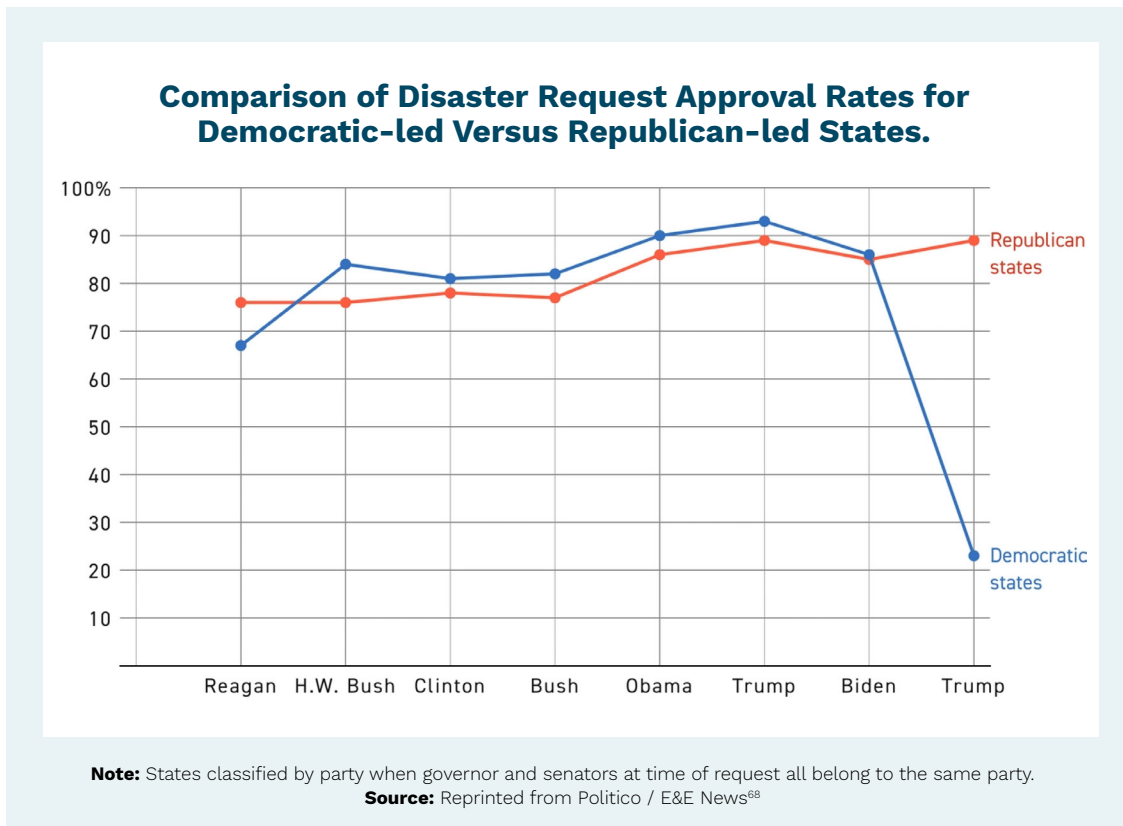
64 Frank, “Harder for Blue States to Get Disaster Funding Under Trump.”

Politicization of Disaster Declarations

The Trump administration withheld aid from some communities based on the state’s political leanings. In May 2025, Allegany County, Maryland, experienced flooding that caused \$33.7 million in damages; this amount is more than 20% of the county’s entire annual budget.⁶⁵ FEMA denied their request for disaster assistance throughout multiple appeals. On the same day, Trump approved disaster assistance for states that supported him in the last election: Alaska, Nebraska, and North Dakota. He denied support for states that did not support him, including Maryland, Vermont, and Illinois. These divergent decisions, as well as the president’s repeated statements on social media, suggest a pattern of political preferences in disaster declarations.⁶⁶

According to a report from Politico, Trump’s disaster approval for states differed based on their political leadership. For states with a Democrat governor and Democrat senators, he approved only 23% of disaster funding requests, but for Republican-led states, he approved 89% of their requests. As Figure 5 shows, he approved disaster funds for Democrat states at the lowest rate of any administration. Ultimately, this resulted in \$250 million in funding denied to Democratic states that could have been used to help communities in need.⁶⁷

Figure 5



65 Robertson, “Denied Federal Aid, Town Feels Forgotten.”

66 Aoun Anguiera, “Trump Gives Disaster Declarations to Alaska and Others but Denies Illinois, Vermont and Maryland.”

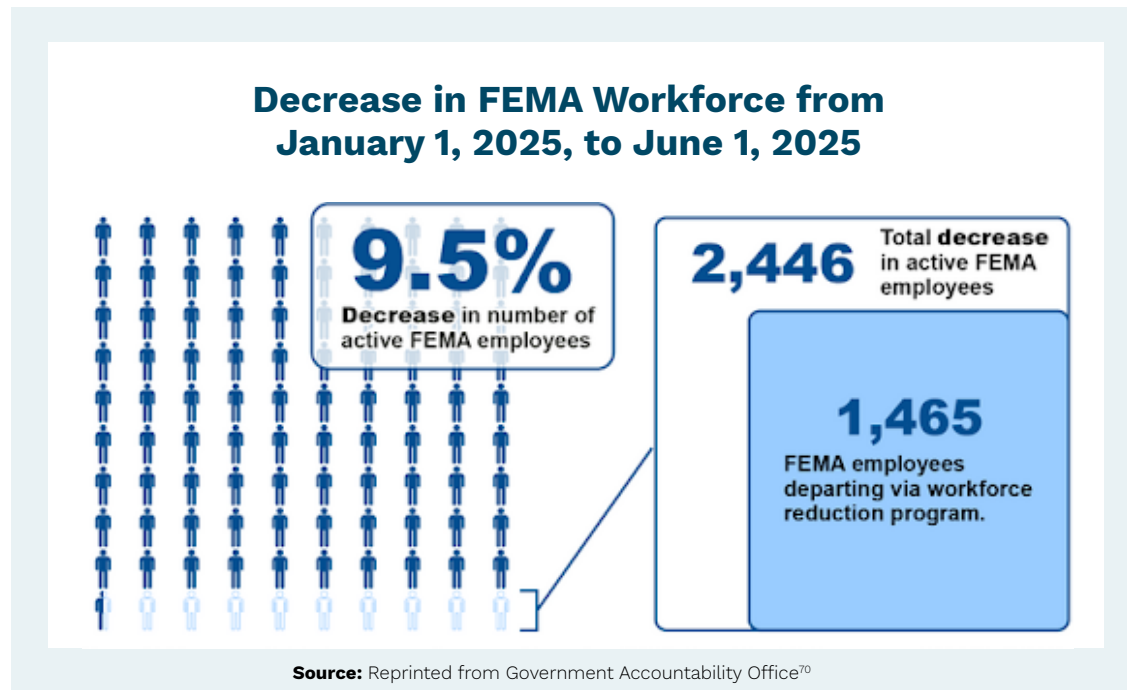
67 Frank, “Harder for Blue States to Get Disaster Funding Under Trump.”

68 Frank, “Harder for Blue States to Get Disaster Funding Under Trump.”

Reduced Stability Within the Agency

In 2025, three different acting administrators led FEMA within a short period, reflecting broader instability in the agency's leadership and workforce. This instability had repercussions. The Government Accountability Office analyzed workforce changes from the beginning of 2025 to June 2025. As shown in Figure 6, FEMA experienced a decrease in the number of active employees from 25,800 to 23,350 between January 2025 and June 2025, a total decrease of 2,446 employees. Of these employees, 24 were Senior Executive Service Employees.⁶⁹

Figure 6



These personnel reductions leave the Agency with less expertise and exacerbate its already limited capacity. When senior executives leave, FEMA loses individuals with years of institutional knowledge and experience. Even before the Trump administration, FEMA experienced training gaps that challenged its ability to help people. During Hurricane Helene in 2024, FEMA deployed employees who were not fully trained to assist with response and recovery efforts. As the Trump administration purposefully reduces FEMA's workforce and encourages current federal employees to leave, this will intensify these pre-existing challenges.⁷¹

The consequences of the reduced workforce are severe as natural disasters become more concurrent and frequent. This large number strains FEMA's limited workforce capacity. Despite the increase in disasters, FEMA has not met hiring goals, especially as the Trump administration decreased the federal workforce. At the beginning of hurricane season in June of 2025, there were already 710 open major disasters and emergency declarations. Because of these open cases, only 12% of the incident management workforce was available to respond to hurricane-related disasters because there were not enough employees to manage the number of disasters occurring elsewhere at the same time. Overall, the challenges within the

69 U.S. Government Accountability Office, *FEMA Federal Response Workforce Readiness*.

70 U.S. Government Accountability Office, *FEMA Federal Response Workforce Readiness*.

71 U.S. Government Accountability Office, *FEMA Federal Response Workforce Readiness*.

agency create barriers to effective disaster response and support.⁷²

While this report focuses on changes to FEMA, it should be noted that these changes happened alongside cuts at the National Weather Service (NWS) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). In February of 2025, the Trump administration cut over a thousand workers from NOAA and the National Weather Service, leaving nearly half of the weather forecast offices critically understaffed.⁷³ These agencies create daily weather forecasts that serve as the backbone for the nation's weather reporting systems. Officials warned that staffing gaps would harm the agencies' ability to accurately forecast extreme weather events such as hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes, as well as long-term forecasts that aid priorities from fishery management to accurate ocean navigation. These changes affect the community's ability to predict and respond to disasters and hamper long-term climate data essential to flood-prevention planning.⁷⁴

Lengthy Legal Battles

Many of the Trump administration's policies were met with legal challenges. The Associated Press reports that as of January 2026, there had been 359 lawsuits filed against Trump's second administration.⁷⁵

These lawsuits take months, if not years, to fully resolve. Even when the courts rule that a specific policy was illegal, the damage has been done to state and local governments whose funding was paused or whose projects were canceled. The judicial system's slow legal process allows unlawful policies to remain in effect for long periods of time before a final ruling is made, leaving communities in confusion and uncertainty.

This systemic legal delay was particularly damaging in the case of the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) Program. After its initial cancellation, BRIC's legal timeline spanned almost an entire year before funding was available to the communities again (Figure 7). Actions regarding the BRIC program exemplify how FEMA's changes ultimately harm communities across the United States, specifically those in the Appalachian region.

Figure 7



72 U.S. Government Accountability Office, *FEMA Federal Response Workforce Readiness*.

73 Yale E360, "Trump Administration Fires Hundreds of Climate and Weather Specialists."

74 Borenstein, "Nearly Half of National Weather Service Offices Have 20% Vacancy Rates, and Experts Say It's a Risk."

75 Catalini et al., "Tracking Lawsuits Against Trump Administration."

Case Study: Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities Grant

The Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program was signed into law by President Trump in 2018 with the goal of providing significant pre-disaster mitigation support to communities. Despite its importance, the second Trump administration attempted to terminate the program, prompting a subsequent lawsuit in 2025. The funding cuts and legal challenges, as detailed in the FEMA timeline above, exemplify the agency's changes in 2025.

The BRIC program supports pre-disaster hazard mitigation activities that mitigate natural disaster risks through infrastructure development. These risks often occur in communities that have faced natural disasters in the past.⁷⁶

BRIC supports various activities, including infrastructure and construction projects, building code adoption and enforcement, technical training, project scoping, and management costs related to the infrastructure projects.⁷⁷ For example, in Appalachia, awarded BRIC projects include:

- In Bridgeville, Pennsylvania, the borough was awarded \$5.3 million to implement a levee system project as part of the FY2022 awards⁷⁸
- In Rand, West Virginia, the town was awarded \$6.8 million to upgrade its sewage system in order to improve drainage and prevent flooding as part of the FY2023 awards.⁷⁹
- In Frankfort, Kentucky, the community received \$10.5 million in hazard mitigation planning to mitigate future flooding as part of the FY2021 awards.⁸⁰
- In Mineral Ridge, Ohio, the Mahoning Valley Sanitary District received \$38 million to upgrade the Mineral Ridge Dam as part of the FY2022 awards.⁸¹

It is worth noting that the West Virginia and Pennsylvania projects listed above have not received the funding they were selected for. The March 6, 2026 enforcement ruling noted above in Figure 7 should ensure that applicants receive grant money they were already awarded, but as of May 2026, it is still unclear how quickly or if that will happen. This back and forth is obviously problematic for communities who have put years of effort into the planning and application process for these grants.

The types of projects highlighted above reflect a broader trend for the top mitigation priorities identified across Kentucky, Ohio, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania. In most projects, dam/levee breaks and flooding were identified as primary risks by the communities. Combined, these two categories accounted for over 88% of all obligated funds, totaling more than \$74.2 million (Table 2).⁸²

76 Federal Emergency Management Agency, "Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities."

77 Federal Emergency Management Agency, "Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities Program Funding Opportunity for Fiscal Years 2024-25."

78 Ford, "FEMA Cancels Flood Prevention Program in Bridgeville."

79 Federal Emergency Management Agency, "President Biden Announces \$1 Billion in Project Selections to Make Communities More Resilient to Climate Change and Natural Hazards Through His Investing in America Agenda."

80 "KY, Other States Win Court Ruling."

81 Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA Invests \$38 Million to Support Upgrades to the Mineral Ridge Dam in Ohio.

82 Federal Emergency Management Agency, "Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities and Flood Mitigation Assistance Obligations Dashboard."

Table 2

BRIC Obligations in Four-State Region by Primary Hazard Identified		
PRIMARY HAZARD IDENTIFIED	TOTAL OBLIGATED AMOUNT	PERCENT
Dam/Levee break	\$38,774,464	46.1%
Flooding	\$35,388,159	42.0%
Infrastructure failure	\$6,581,496	7.8%
Fire	\$1,602,000	1.9%
Landslide/Debris flow	\$987,241	1.2%
Other (Tornado, Extreme Temperature, Severe Storm, Winter Storm, Biological Incident, Uncategorized)	\$841,825	1.0%

Source: FEMA BRIC Obligation Dashboard, Accessed 4/30/2026⁸³

BRIC is one of the largest pre-disaster mitigation funding sources, providing \$4.6 billion from fiscal year 2020 to 2023.⁸⁴ Under the Disaster Recovery Reform Act of 2018, the President has the discretion to set aside funding equal to 6% of the previous year’s post-disaster spending.⁸⁵ In 2021, the program was bolstered by an additional \$1 billion investment from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, to be distributed at \$200 million each year from fiscal year 2022 to 2026.⁸⁶

Its proactive approach is particularly cost-effective. According to the Congressional Research Service, “for every \$1 invested by federal grant programs, society as a whole is expected to save \$6 due to reduced future losses.”⁸⁷ By attempting to terminate BRIC, the administration effectively chose a more expensive long-term path of ‘reactive’ spending over ‘proactive’ saving.

BRIC Program Financial Footprint in Appalachia

In our four-state region, BRIC has a large impact, providing millions of dollars to our communities. Across Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and West Virginia, FEMA obligated \$94.9 million in BRIC funding across 60 subapplications (Table 3).⁸⁸

83 Federal Emergency Management Agency, “Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities and Flood Mitigation Assistance Obligations Dashboard.”

84 Horn, *BRIC Recent Developments*.

85 Horn, *Post-Disaster and Pre-Disaster Hazard Mitigation*.

86 Horn, *BRIC Recent Developments*.

87 Horn, *Post-Disaster and Pre-Disaster Hazard Mitigation*.

88 Federal Emergency Management Agency, “Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities and Flood Mitigation Assistance Obligations Dashboard.”

Table 3

Total BRIC Obligations by State from FY2022 - 2025*				
STATE	TOTAL FUNDING REQUESTED	TOTAL FUNDING AWARDED**	TOTAL FUNDING OBLIGATED***	FUNDING GAP BETWEEN FUNDING REQUESTED AND FUNDING OBLIGATED
PA	\$424,965,666	\$194,598,158	\$40,439,300	\$384,526,365
KY	\$176,829,528	\$30,806,129	\$2,114,29	\$174,715,231
OH	\$153,493,951	\$120,693,305	\$51,877,163	\$101,616,788
WV	\$53,959,199	\$10,675,684	\$446,250	\$53,512,949

Source: OpenFEMA HMA Subapplications -v2, Accessed 4/30/2026.⁸⁹

*For a full list of BRIC obligations by all states and territories, see Appendix 1. **Total Funding Awarded includes projects where funding has been obligated as well as projects selected for funding but not yet able to draw down funds as of May 2026. ***Total Funding Obligated is defined as "a legally binding agreement that will result in outlays, immediately or in the future."⁹⁰ It means that they agreed to spend the money for specified outlined purposes, such as a project award.

BRIC Unmet Demand

The obligated BRIC grants represent only a small portion of Appalachian communities’ needs. Despite BRIC’s budget increase between 2021–2024 (see Figure 8), the need still dramatically outpaced the funding available. From 2022–2025 in our four-state region of Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Kentucky, the states requested \$809.2 million in federal support through the BRIC program, but only 11.7% (\$94.9 million) of the demand was met through obligated awards (Table 2). This leaves a \$714 million funding gap for which communities will need to seek external grant support, rely on scarce state and local funds, or simply be left unmet.⁹¹

Similar patterns are observed nationwide, as total requested funds continued to rise, even as the funds available declined. In 2023, the demand for BRIC funds exceeded available funds by more than five times.⁹²

As shown in Appendix 1, which details BRIC obligations for all states and territories, Pennsylvania and Ohio fall among the top ten recipients for BRIC obligations, while Kentucky and West Virginia fall in the bottom ten for the nation. This dramatic difference in obligations reflects, in part, the need for more technical assistance to enable smaller communities to apply for this funding. In 2024, Headwater Economics found that low-capacity counties received 19 times less BRIC funding than high-capacity counties, as BRIC applications can take a year or more to assemble, which presents a barrier to low-capacity communities.⁹³

Even though the program had not fully met Appalachian communities’ needs, BRIC funding decreased in 2025 under the Trump Administration’s intentional funding cuts, mirroring trends across other federal programs shown in ReImagine Appalachia’s [Flatline report](#) released in December 2025 (Figure 8). By attempting to claw back previously obligated funds, the administration destabilized an already strained funding landscape.

89 Federal Emergency Management Agency, “HMA Subapplications.”

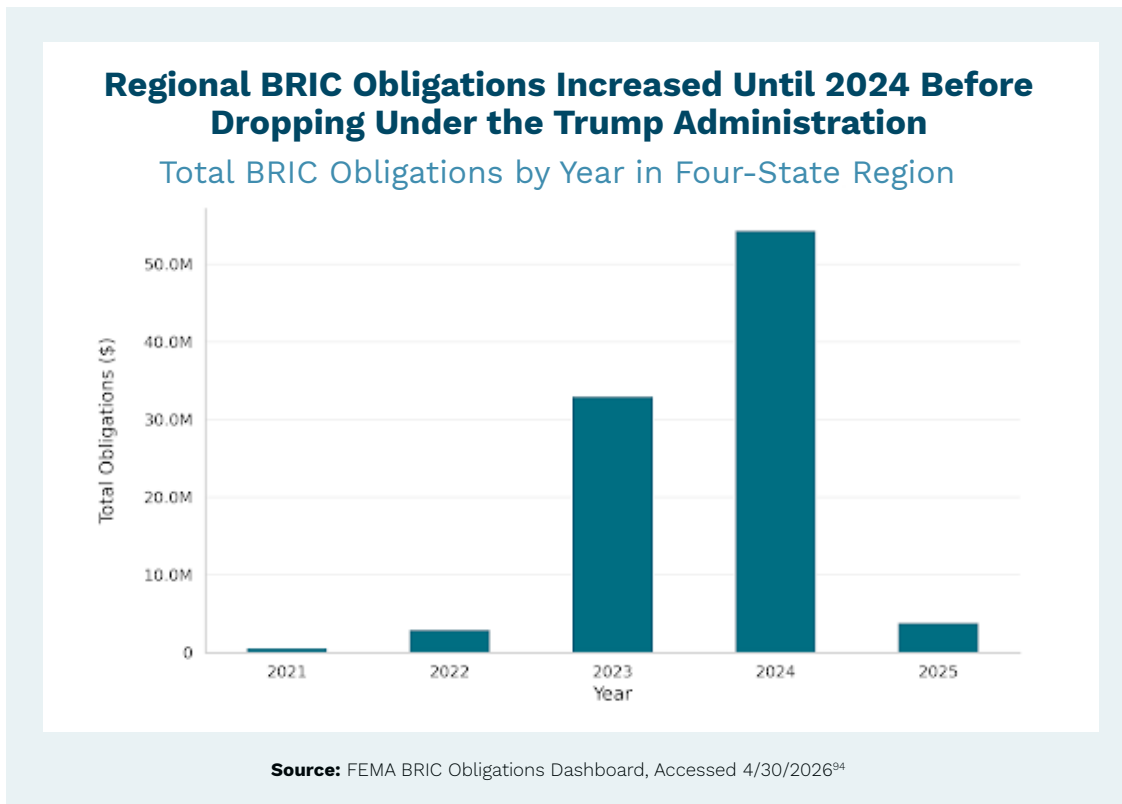
90 U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Obligations vs. Outlays.”

91 Federal Emergency Management Agency, “HMA Subapplications.”

92 Southern Environmental Law Center, Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities: Improving a Vital Program.

93 Smith, “Rising Demand for FEMA’s BRIC Program.”

Figure 8



Impact of 2025 BRIC Termination

When the BRIC program was terminated in 2025, before its court-ordered reinstatement in 2026, Appalachian communities were left more vulnerable to natural disasters, especially flooding.

One such town that suffered from the BRIC termination was Duryea, Pennsylvania. Located on the banks of the Lackawanna River, Duryea routinely faces a high risk of flooding from river overflow. Over the past three years, Duryea has sustained millions of dollars in property damage from floods. As rainfall has substantially increased over the last century due to climate change, these flood risks have intensified.⁹⁵

To protect the town from flooding, Duryea needs to raise its levee by about three feet. This project will cost approximately \$11 million, totaling three times Duryea's entire annual budget. Consisting of 5,000 residents, the town simply does not have the funds for this project without federal support.⁹⁶

Before the BRIC termination in 2025, Duryea spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on levee upgrade designs needed in preparation for submitting the grant application. However, without the Trump administration opening for BRIC applications in 2025, the town was unable to access these funds.⁹⁷

Similar stories can be found throughout the country. Located in Southwest Virginia, Pound is a small town with a total of 913 residents.⁹⁸ Such a small population means that, like Duryea, it has a limited budget to fund the infrastructure changes it needs to protect itself from disasters.

⁹⁴ Federal Emergency Management Agency, "Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities and Flood Mitigation Assistance Obligations Dashboard."

⁹⁵ Hersher, "Trump Cuts Turned Rural Towns into Sitting Ducks."

⁹⁶ Hersher, "Trump Cuts Turned Rural Towns into Sitting Ducks."

⁹⁷ Hersher, "Trump Cuts Turned Rural Towns into Sitting Ducks."

⁹⁸ Census Report., "Census Profile."

In January 2025, representatives from FEMA met with Pound local leaders to discuss funding for technical assistance to help the town develop a flood resiliency strategy and plan. This technical assistance from FEMA would have enabled the town to be ready to apply for a BRIC grant to protect the community from future flooding while adding tourism value. But, because of the BRIC termination, the town could not complete the plan. This means they are unable to move their project for flood mitigation to the next phase, and instead are back to square one after years of planning.⁹⁹

The termination of the BRIC program also impacted projects in Kentucky, including \$9 million for projects already selected and \$23 million in pending applications. In a tragic coincidence that underscores the need for disaster preparation funding, the announcement of the BRIC cancellation was made on April 4, 2025, the same day floodwaters and tornadoes hit Kentucky, resulting in an emergency disaster declaration across the state and the loss of at least seven lives.¹⁰⁰

The April 2025 Kentucky storms were not an isolated incident. Appalachian communities across Kentucky, Southwestern Virginia, Southern West Virginia, and beyond experienced severe flooding in February 2021, July 2022, September 2024, February 2025, and again, including multiple tornadoes, in early April 2025.¹⁰¹ These repeated incidents in the same area resulted in mudslides, flash floods, closed roads, destroyed bridges, the loss of homes and businesses, and the loss of human lives. They create tremendous burdens on local communities and underscore the need for real, lasting solutions to make Appalachian communities less vulnerable to repeated extreme weather.

Even though BRIC was reinstated in 2026, its absence in 2025 had a lasting impact. A full year without it harmed communities. The BRIC termination heightened uncertainty and fear among residents in at-risk areas, who are particularly aware of the devastation these disasters can cause. Projects faced costly setbacks. Communities used their own funds to prepare for a grant cycle that did not materialize. Other areas with projects in progress had to halt them due to insufficient funding or find alternative support, even as they dealt with ongoing flood events.¹⁰²

Legal battles take a long time to play out, as shown in the figure below, it took over a year of legal battles for the BRIC funding termination to be reversed.

As of April 2026, BRIC applications have reopened, but with new barriers. Eligible activities are more limited than in previous rounds of funding, for example the new round of funding will prioritize construction-ready infrastructure projects such as those protecting transportation, utilities, water systems with clearly outlined risk reduction benefits. Though small, impoverished communities will receive a scoring bonus, narrower limitations for capacity building projects and an end to funding for Hazard Mitigation Plans create problematic limitations for many Appalachian communities.

99 Garrison, "Community Improvement Projects Proceed in Pound as Some Funding Remains Uncertain."

100 Giffin, "It's Devastating": Kentucky Set to Lose Millions."

101 Brant, "Appalachians Trapped in Cycle of Flooding and Rebuilding."

102 Seata, "The BRIC Program Is Essential in Our New Climate Reality."

Conclusion

Flooding has ravaged areas throughout Appalachia, and the threat to the region is only intensifying. From 2020 to 2025, FEMA obligated a total of \$5.9 billion in grants to Ohio, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Without this financial support, states simply could not afford to respond adequately to natural disasters.

Despite the necessity of these supports, the Trump administration made it abundantly clear that it believes states should play the primary financial role in preparing for and responding to natural disasters. Throughout 2025, FEMA experienced policy shifts to align the agency with these goals.

Overall, these changes in 2025 resulted in delayed disaster responses, increased politicization of disaster funding, reduced stability within the agency, and prolonged legal battles. The Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program serves as a case study in which these issues manifested.

FEMA's changes and their impacts in 2025 ultimately harmed Appalachian communities, a region experiencing more frequent and more intense floods. Appalachian communities cannot afford further instability. To build a truly flood-resilient region, we must return to a model of robust, stable, and transparent federal investment.

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Appendix 1

Total BRIC Obligations by State, Sorted Highest to Lowest from FY2022 - 2025*

Rank	State	Total Obligations	Rank	State	Total Obligations
1	Utah	\$185,094,098	40	Mississippi	\$3,555,875
2	New Jersey	\$112,176,299	41	Indiana	\$3,357,263
3	California	\$65,476,251	42	American Samoa	\$3,354,750
4	North Carolina	\$59,858,459	43	Guam	\$3,226,066
5	New York	\$59,362,225	44	Arizona	\$2,964,176
6	Washington	\$52,103,359	45	Rhode Island	\$2,960,071
7	Ohio	\$51,877,163	46	Illinois	\$2,933,060
8	South Carolina	\$46,153,632	47	Alabama	\$2,448,664
9	Pennsylvania	\$40,439,300	48	Tennessee	\$2,228,588
10	District of Columbia	\$31,857,522	49	Northern Mariana Islands	\$2,131,333
11	Virginia	\$31,750,772	50	Kentucky	\$2,114,297
12	Connecticut	\$25,362,398	51	New Hampshire	\$1,910,734
13	Massachusetts	\$21,309,741	52	Puerto Rico	\$1,500,000
14	Michigan	\$19,509,572	53	Idaho	\$1,338,458
15	Florida	\$14,690,459	54	Delaware	\$1,313,709
16	Wisconsin	\$11,721,622	55	U.S. Virgin Islands	\$764,331
17	Missouri	\$11,570,463	56	West Virginia	\$446,250
18	Oklahoma	\$11,219,070			
19	Louisiana	\$11,035,372			
20	Maryland	\$9,504,262			
21	Nebraska	\$8,889,082			
22	Alaska	\$8,286,308			
23	Arkansas	\$6,623,028			
24	South Dakota	\$6,555,568			
25	Oregon	\$5,558,830			
26	Kansas	\$5,476,052			
27	Georgia	\$5,474,522			
28	Hawaii	\$5,273,649			
29	Texas	\$5,249,503			
30	Maine	\$5,086,046			
31	New Mexico	\$4,983,423			
32	Nevada	\$4,831,311			
33	Montana	\$4,826,957			
34	Iowa	\$4,351,824			
35	Minnesota	\$4,305,774			
36	Wyoming	\$4,282,582			
37	North Dakota	\$4,141,161			
38	Colorado	\$4,053,801			
39	Vermont	\$3,789,053			

*Defined by [USASpending.Gov](https://www.usaspending.gov), an "obligation" is defined as "a legally binding agreement that will result in outlays, immediately or in the future." It means that they agreed to spend the money for specified outlined purposes, such as a project award. Note: This table does not include funds selected for BRIC awards that have not yet been obligated funding. As of May 2026, only \$1.6 billion, or 24% of the total \$6.5 billion in funding for projects selected for BRIC awards, has been obligated. **Note:** This table does not include funds selected for BRIC awards that have not yet been obligated funding. As of May 2026, only \$1.6 billion, or 24% of the total \$6.5 billion in funding for projects selected for BRIC awards, has been obligated