

Disasters waiting to happen?

BY STEVE DASBACH

Disaster Quiz: Which of the following types of disaster relief qualify for money from the Federal Emergency Management Agency?

- (a) Moving earthquake victims to more expensive housing, then paying their rent — for the rest of their lives.
- (b) Paying for snow removal — in June.
- (c) Making payments to cities where disasters haven't happened yet, but *might* happen someday.

If you guessed all of the above, you're right. They're all documented examples of FEMA waste — and proof that government disaster relief programs have become another disastrous government boondoggle.

An earthquake hit Northridge, California, in 1994 — but the aftershock will be hitting taxpayers for the rest of their lives. That's because the federal government picked up the tab for "temporary" rent subsidies for over 6,000 low-income residents, many of whom were moved to more expensive housing. Now Congress, with the Republicans in control of the national checkbook, has made the subsidies *permanent*.

Snow might be considered an emergency in Cancun, but in Connecticut? Last year the town of Vernon, Connecticut, got an emergency FEMA grant of \$40,023 — in June — to reimburse the town for the preceding year's snow plowing costs. What happened next? The Vernon City Council promptly reduced next year's snow-removal budget by almost the exact same amount as the federal grant. And why not? When it comes to disaster relief, when it snows, it pours.

FEMA even funds disasters that haven't even happened yet. In a press release dated Dec. 26, 1996, Director Jamie Lee Witt says, "FEMA will embark on an ambitious campaign to prevent people and communities from becoming the victims of disasters. We are ready to work with city, county, and state officials to establish disaster-resistant communities."

Prevent people from becoming disaster victims? Whoever coined the phrase, "Everyone talks about the weather but no one ever does anything about it" never met a FEMA bureaucrat!

As President Clinton continues to hand out millions of dollars in federal aid in the wake of the most recent flooding, maybe it's time to admit that government disaster relief programs — and the FEMA bureaucrats who swoop in like vultures after every tornado, earthquake, and flood — are causing more problems than they solve.

Politicians are turning disasters into government pork. In the last five years, FEMA's budget

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soared from \$5 billion to \$13 billion. So FEMA bureaucrats are eagerly searching for new disasters to justify the money. In 1996, for example, the agency declared 75 disasters, or one every five days — the most in history.

FEMA bureaucrats are also busy redefining disaster. For example, before 1993, snow storms had never been declared official disasters; they were simply part of winter. But since 1993, almost 50 snow storms have won the coveted title of “major disaster” — and the federal cash that goes along with it.

And who gets all this money? Interestingly, the states with the most electoral votes win the most disaster relief. As pointed out recently by Jodie T. Allen in the on-line magazine, *Slate*, between 1989 and 1994, California, with 54 electoral votes, raked in 55% of all such aid. Florida, with 20 votes, pulled in 20%.

Government disaster relief also encourages people to place themselves in harm’s way — because they know the federal government will rescue them. The endless flow of federal subsidies and low-interest loans has tempted victims of floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes to rebuild in disaster-prone areas.

Even the government admits this. In January, FEMA officials complained that many people kept moving back into the same flood plains from which they had been rescued by FEMA a few years earlier.

Federal disaster aid also encourages people to behave irresponsibly — at the expense of more responsible Americans. For instance, a 1990 study showed that just 20% of California homeowners had purchased earthquake insurance voluntarily — despite dire predictions by seismologists that a major quake is expected by 2000. And why should they, when FEMA will use tax money to rebuild their homes anyway?

Government disaster aid also drives out private charity, and is making voluntary organizations like the Red Cross obsolete. Americans are becoming more reluctant to assist their neighbors, since FEMA bureaucrats are being paid to do the job. By doing so, FEMA is helping to dissolve the civil bonds that hold Americans together.

Abolishing FEMA would end the political favoritism, encourage people to make more responsible choices, and renew the great American tradition of neighbor helping neighbor.

Federal disaster relief, while popular with the victims of any particular natural disaster, is harmful to taxpayers, harmful in the long run to the people who suffer from disasters, and harmful to the spirit of America. Government disaster aid has become a disaster for America. We should end it.

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