

Why GAO Did This Study

Each year, the federal government obligates billions of dollars through programs and activities that provide assistance to state and local governments, tribes, and certain nonprofit organizations and individuals that have suffered injury or damages from major disaster or emergency incidents, such as hurricanes, tornados, or fires. While FEMA tracks DRF spending related to major disasters and emergencies declared under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, there has not been a systematic effort to account for federal obligations for disaster assistance outside of the DRF.

The Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2015, includes a provision for GAO to report on disaster assistance expenditures by the federal government. This report identifies federal disaster assistance programs and activities across 17 federal departments and agencies and the obligations for these programs and activities, where available, during fiscal years 2005 through 2014.

To conduct this work, GAO selected 17 federal departments and agencies identified in the *National Planning Frameworks* as having responsibility for leading or coordinating federal efforts to mitigate, respond to, and recover from domestic disaster incidents. GAO analyzed documents identifying and describing disaster assistance programs and activities, interviewed federal officials, and distributed a data collection instrument to obtain, among other things, obligation amounts associated with each program or activity identified.

View [GAO-16-797](#). For more information, contact Chris P. Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov.

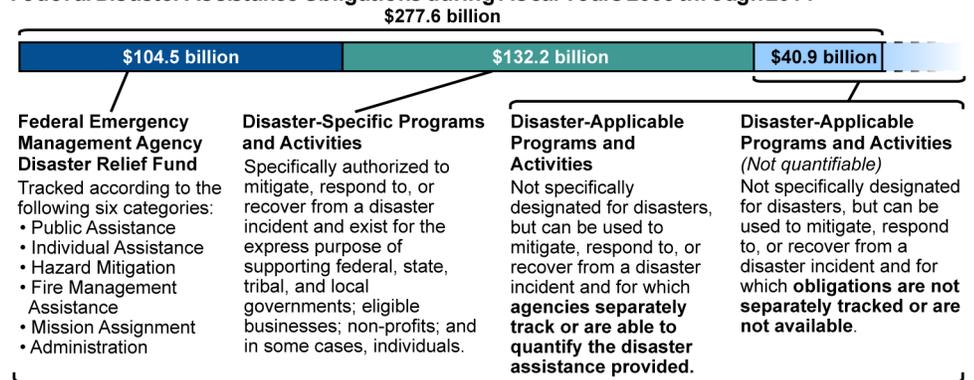
FEDERAL DISASTER ASSISTANCE

Federal Departments and Agencies Obligated at Least \$277.6 Billion during Fiscal Years 2005 through 2014

What GAO Found

During fiscal years 2005 through 2014, the federal government obligated at least \$277.6 billion across 17 federal departments and agencies for disaster assistance programs and activities. This estimate constitutes total obligations identifiable to disaster activities across three categories: the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Disaster Relief Fund (DRF), disaster-specific programs and activities identified across the 17 departments and agencies, and disaster-applicable programs and activities across the 17 departments and agencies (see figure).

Federal Disaster Assistance Obligations during Fiscal Years 2005 through 2014



- Disaster assistance programs and activities across 17 federal departments and agencies**
- Department of Agriculture
 - Department of Commerce
 - Department of Defense
 - Department of Education
 - Department of Energy
 - Department of Health and Human Services
 - Department of Homeland Security
 - Department of Housing and Urban Development
 - Department of the Interior
 - Department of Justice
 - Department of Labor
 - Department of Transportation
 - Department of the Treasury
 - Department of Veterans Affairs
 - Environmental Protection Agency
 - General Services Administration
 - Small Business Administration

Source: GAO analysis of federal department and agency data. | GAO-16-797

Note: An obligation is a definite commitment that creates a legal liability of the government for the payment of goods and services ordered or received. Obligations reported for some disaster-specific and disaster-applicable programs and activities contain estimates. GAO's inclusion of estimated data in aggregated totals contributes to an approximation of a government-wide total.

The estimate of \$277.6 billion represents a minimum and not the total amount of disaster assistance spending by the federal government during fiscal years 2005 through 2014 because relevant obligations for some programs and activities are not separately tracked or are not available. Specifically, GAO found that more than half of the 17 departments and agencies in the scope of this review reported that obligations for certain disaster assistance programs or activities during this time frame are not separately tracked or are not available, for various reasons. For example, 5 departments and agencies reported that some disaster assistance programs or activities are not separately tracked because spending related to these activities is generally subsumed by a department's general operating budget or mission-related costs. Another 4 departments and agencies reported that obligations and expenditures specific to disaster assistance activities are not tracked or cannot be reliably estimated because there is no requirement for state or other recipients of the financial support to indicate whether or how much of the funding or assistance is used for disasters.