

FEMA Administrator Criswell Addresses Tribal Leaders at the National Congress of American Indians

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Thank you, President Holsey for that kind introduction.

I greatly appreciate the invitation to join the National Congress of American Indians today.

Your mission over the last seven decades to protect and enhance treaty and sovereign rights, to improve the quality of life for native communities and peoples, and to promote a common understanding of the rightful place of tribes in the family of American governments, is one of great importance, and one that FEMA supports.

Before I begin, I would like to start by sharing FEMA's mission with you.

We are a workforce of over 20,000 people focused on helping people before, during, and after disasters. We deliver on our mission through living our core values of compassion, fairness, integrity, and respect.

And just as we have done since our creation in 1979, we help the nation prepare for, respond to, and recover from all hazards. And as we see the impacts of climate change, our role in mitigating against future hazards has never been more important.

However, there is a process that determines when and how FEMA can get involved.

Federal Support During Disasters

Federal assistance is authorized by the President when the tribal executive or Governor requests assistance for one of two reasons, and sometimes both:



An emergency declaration is for when there is an imminent threat to life and safety. Or a major disaster declaration because the response and recovery needs of a tribal, state, or a territorial government will exceed their capacity.

What does that mean? Let's look at two examples.

Hurricane Ian—we expected an imminent threat in Florida based on the path and severity of the storm. A pre-landfall emergency declaration was requested and granted to preposition resources and support evacuation needs.

The tribal nations located in the state of Florida decided to go under the State's emergency declaration but could have chosen to pursue their own emergency declaration.

Once the threat had passed, it was determined the response needs and damages exceeded the capacity of the communities impacted, resulting in a major disaster declaration.

That was a large incident, but it doesn't have to be.

For another example, let's consider the December winter storms:

During the week leading up to Christmas, severe winter storms adversely impacted several tribal nations in South Dakota, including the Oglala Sioux Tribe and Rosebud Sioux Tribe.

Our teams at FEMA Headquarters and the FEMA Region 8 office immediately opened up our lines of communication so we could better understand the needs of these nations and their tribal citizens.

After hearing directly from tribal leadership, we deployed response teams to both tribal nations' headquarters to provide technical assistance, identify winter storm impacts, and review FEMA and other federal resources for assistance.

Presidents Frank Star Comes Out and President Scott Herman submitted requests for presidential disaster declarations and FEMA assistance.

And on Monday, Feb 20 President Biden issued Major Disaster Declarations for both the Oglala Sioux Tribe and the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, which includes snow



assistance.

Another way to think about this is federally supported, tribal/state/territorial managed, and locally executed.

Federally supported is more than FEMA. We are just one part of the team.

FEMA has the authority to mission assign other federal agencies to join the response and recovery mission.

From the Department of Defense to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to the Department of the Interior, we call the right partners to the table who have the right resources to solve these complex problems.

From hurricanes, to wildfires, to tornadoes to public health emergencies and cyber-attacks the federal government is primed to show up when and wherever we are needed.

We also know that every community faces unique challenges during a disaster which means it is our job to tailor our assistance to their needs.

Tribal Nations for example—are the first and often times the only line of defense in protecting their citizens during an emergency. That is why, I have charged the agency to lean forward in gaining insight into how we can better serve the tribal nations who often need our help the most.

I, too, am on a mission to do my part in helping us, better help you – that is why I am here today, and why I have traveled to tribes across the country to hear what you have to say.

My first visit to Indian Country as the FEMA Administrator was in July of 2021 at the height of the fire season, where I was privileged to meet with the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde leadership in Oregon.

We gathered outside their nation's old powwow grounds, formed a circle, and held productive and frank discussions about the toll the persistent drought and raging wildfires had on their tribal citizens, staff, resources, and traditions.



What I heard in Oregon, is also what I heard from other tribes while at the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

The bottom line is this, we must find ways to improve nation-to-nation relationships, support tribal sovereignty, and tribal self-determination.

Admittedly, too often in our history, we have failed to understand your nations unique needs in disaster response and recovery.

I can tell you that is changing during my administration.

I think we can all agree that for decades, federal agencies have done more talking than listening. Sadly, this is particularly true for our relationships with tribal nations.

Over the last year, however, we started talking less and listening more.

From listening sessions to tribal consultations, to outreach from our regional tribal affairs liaisons and FEMA's first-ever National Tribal Advocate, Ms. Kelbie Kennedy, we want to hear from you.

Our aspiration is to improve engagement, partnership, and service to your nations and the tribal communities that you serve. We will listen before we plan and plan only after we listen.

We acknowledge that just as every community is different, so is every tribal nation. Therefore, we are committed to co-creating solutions that factor in the expertise of tribal nations and tribal leadership.

Solutions that also address the climate challenges we are facing, which threaten more than your livelihoods, but your very way of life.

That is why mitigating future threats is the first step on the path to resilience. We are reducing the impacts we are seeing from the increase in the number and severity of storms. Let me give you two examples of successful mitigation projects some nations have taken on.

The Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe in Washington state used our Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grant funding to build an evacuation tower



for its entire community since their tribal lands are located in an area where earthquakes could trigger tsunamis. This was a tribal-led process that led to an innovative approach to protect an entire community. And the Citizen Potawatomi Nation in Oklahoma used the same BRIC grant program to build a two-story safe room that is attached to their tribal casino.

The nation pushed FEMA to rethink how the funding could be best used to meet the nation's needs. The result has been a great success for both the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, their citizens, and all of their neighbors. Not only can this safe room protect 5,000 people when a disaster strikes, it has also become a gathering place for various tribal trainings, conferences, meetings.

Successful mitigation projects like these are envisioned by those that live on the land and know your needs best.

I hope you return to your nations and serve as ambassadors for the power of mitigation and share how incredibly important it is to become more resilient against future threats.

However, we know taking on these projects can be a cumbersome process and that it is our job to connect Nations with access to resources needed to do this work. That is why it is so important to have the right people in place who can help strengthen our relationships and engagement with nations.

For years NCAI and tribal leaders have told FEMA that we needed to have a political appointee solely dedicated to Tribal Nations and tribal affairs within the agency. So, we acted and welcomed our first-ever National Tribal Affairs Advocate Kelbie Kennedy, who hit the ground running and is helping us deliver on that goal. Kelbie is your direct link to us and will make sure FEMA is living up to its treaty and trust responsibilities.

A citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, Kelbie has spent her entire career working on issues that directly relate to FEMA's mission. She also worked extensively on tribal policy with this very body, NCAI. Her political appointment demonstrates our commitment to giving tribal nations a voice.

I would like to thank Kelbie for the great work she has already accomplished and for helping us become the FEMA Indian Country needs and deserves. I'd also like



to thank NCAI for letting us have her.

I look forward to joining you this afternoon to kick off the first of many tribal listening sessions and tribal consultations on “FEMA’s Tribal Declarations Guidance.”

The Guidance, originally published in 2017, outlines the options available to federally recognized tribal governments for requesting a Presidential emergency or major disaster declaration. Together, we will review the criteria FEMA uses to evaluate disaster declaration requests from tribal governments.

Through these government-to-government consultations and listening sessions, I ask that you help me, and my team, understand how we can improve our tribal declarations process.

It has been an honor to join you today and I look forward to working together in the future.

