**Transcript: FEMA Releases the 2017 Hurricane Season FEMA After-Action Report**

**{Intro Music}**

**Mark Peterson:** I'm Mark Peterson with an agency update for today, July 17th, 2018. Last week, FEMA released its 2017 hurricane season after action report. The report examines the agency's performance during this record breaking season. Last year, Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria devastated the nation at a time when FEMA was already supporting numerous federally declared disasters around the country and while female was engaged in the complexities of these three catastrophic hurricane responses, we also responded to the historic wildfires in California. The after action report captures transformative insights from a historic hurricane season that will help FEMA, the emergency management community and the nation chart a path into the future. On this agency update, I caught up with Associate Administrator for Response and Recovery, Jeff Byard, and Katherine Fox, the Director of FEMA’s National Preparedness Assessment Division to discuss the report and how it will help the agency moving forward.

All right, so Jeff Byard, thank you so much for joining the FEMA podcast.

**Jeff Byard**: Thank you. Glad to be here, Mark.

**Mark Peterson**: Katherine Fox, I want to thank you as well for joining us.

**Katherine Fox**: Thanks, Mark. Happy to be here.

**Mark Peterson**: Thanks. And, you know, I think this is a good opportunity for us to kind of talk a little bit about the recent release of the after action report, which was released last week describing FEMA’s response and recovery of the 2017 hurricane season.

**Mark Peterson**: So, Jeff, can you paint us a picture of what FEMA went through as an agency during the hurricane season?

Speaker 3: **Jeff Byard**: Right. Well, you know, Mark is a, as the employees know and in the nation knows, we were faced with historic storms that impacted from Texas to Florida to the Caribbean to include, you know, obviously Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. We also were hit with a historic wildfires in California, you know, going into storm season, we were already in a multiple joint field offices across the nation. So, you know, obviously we were staffing what we needed to staff, but when the hurricanes hit, it caused a tremendous activation of the National Response Coordination Center. A matter of fact, it was the longest activation in history of the National Response Coordination Center here in D.C. Our federal partners stepped up across the mark in every storm, but more importantly, our local and state partners or non-governmental partners that work tirelessly every day, you know, really just stepped up and delivered a big time for the American citizens.

Speaker 3: But, you know, the numbers, we've all seen the numbers, you know, the agency moved more commodities, more people in 60 days, then in the previous 10 to 12 years combined, you know, we registered record number of citizens for assistance, across our nation and, and, you know not as catastrophic, but, we were also impacted with a smaller storms that can be just as deadly, uh, in the Gulf Coast, Hurricane Nate, you know, hit the northern Gulf Coast, which again, prompted a joint field offices and Alabama and Mississippi and other, so, you know, a very, very busy season, very active season. But now when you talk about the magnitude of the impacts, uh, the size, strength and sheer destruction of the storms that we faced, it was truly a Herculean effort, uh, truly a force management effort. And one that did FEMA is not seen. So, you know, that's the context in the world that we operate in.

Speaker 4: **Mark Peterson**: Yeah. So you mentioned a bit about the partners and this is an important document after action document, not just for FEMA, but I think for our partners to understand how things evolve during that hurricane season response. So I'd like to get a sense of what the process was for developing that after action reports. So, Katherine, can you walk us through the process that FEMA goes through to develop these reports?

**Katherine Fox**: Sure, absolutely. So as Jeff said, 2017 was unprecedented, so we took a bit of a different approach. We always look at our performance and, and what we want to take away from all of that. And we do that in, in every single disaster. However, because 2017 was so unique with three back to back major hurricanes and we took a different approach, we wanted to make sure that we can be as transparent as possible.

Speaker 4: We conducted interviews with nearly 500 folks across FEMA from headquarters all the way down to every single field office. We interviewed numerous senior leaders to try to get a sense of what some of the primary issues were. And then we also looked at, um, what sort of data sources could we, uh, analyze to try to have a very data driven after action report. Again, we wanted to make sure that what the findings were and then the recommendations coming out of it were fed by a specific quality unquantifiable, different data elements.

**Mark Peterson**: So it's being released in July of 2018. Is it unusual that it would take, you know, 10 or 11 months to develop a report of this magnitude?

**Katherine Fox**: So this is actually about the same timeframe that we saw with hurricane sandy and the major after action efforts that we did for that disaster.

Speaker 4: Um, I think again, what was unique about 2017 is that we weren't just looking at one incident by itself, but we were looking at the confluence of all three hurricanes. Um, and how that impacted our decisions. How we had to reallocate people across different, a different field offices and look at how to balance those resources. So also finding out what are, what are some of the changes in terms of how the response and the initial recovery changed over time and then making sure that we got input across the entire agency to see if we were capturing the right things to see if people had any additional information that we needed to include. And then the most important part about after action reports is the recommendations. So it's not just a report that sits on the shelf, but it's something that actually guides our future actions.

Speaker 4: Um, and that's something that even though we're just publishing the report in July, we're actually already using a lot of the recommendations that are, that are highlighted in the report in order to do things like informed FEMA strategic priorities.

**Mark Peterson:** How is an after-action like this different than after action reports that are done after smaller disasters?

**Katherine Fox:** Well, first of all, I think just the magnitude and the scale. Second of all, we had a tremendous commitment on behalf of our leadership to transparency because these events were so big because they were so unique and because they all happened in such quick succession, we wanted to make sure that we were documenting not just for ourselves, but for our partners. What are some of the unique attributes of those responses? And what are some of the changes and enhancements that FEMA wants to make coming out of that.

**Mark Peterson:** How do you transfer the recommendations in an after action report into action into some kind of change?

**Katherine Fox:** So that's where we had to work really, really closely with Jeff and his team to make sure that the recommendations and the data that that was underlying a lot of the findings in the AAR, led into a, as he was developing his vision for ORR and for where he wants to take some of the, some of the program offices, particularly in terms of specific areas such as logistics, uh, where we were challenged in a, particularly in Hurricane Maria more than we had been in almost every previous event. Um, so how that feeds into Jeff's priorities. And then what specific actions come out of that? Jeff, do you want to add?

**Jeff Byard:** You know, several points I want to point out. You know, first and foremost, you know, as emergency managers, you know, we, uh, uh, were probably harder on ourselves than anybody at every level. You know, we do after actions a daily. I do an after action with my senior staff every morning at 8:30 and you know, what we do, right? What can we do better and what are we going to do next? So to have a document that had the commitment from the administrator on down to say, Hey, you know, let's point out areas. We did well, which were many, many things. We did well. The agency helped a tremendous amount of Americans record breaking Americans and staying ready to continue to do that. Areas we, uh, you know, and obviously areas we have to improve, we do this understanding that not only are we going to point a finger in where the others are going to say hey, you know, this is, this is where they, uh, you know, did this or that.

But to have that commitment, have that transparency. It's really beneficial because if we lose that, others, not just FEMA, our state emergency management partners, our local emergency management partners, our federal partners, you know, it will stop the process of truly looking at areas where you can improve our discipline and remember our daily improvement efforts are built around one thing, to better serve the American people. And so how do we take this document and transform that into action? Several ways we're going to do that. First and foremost, you know, we started with the administrative strategic plan, build a culture of preparedness, ready the nation for catastrophic disasters and reduced the complexity of FEMA. That is our overarching guide document. What 2017, the hurricanes and wildfires illustrated for us or where somewhere or some concrete areas we can improve that first and foremost, the, overarching recommendation that we're putting forth to move forward is a revision in our national response framework, which is our guiding document that, uh, um, uh, you know, God's how, how not just FEMA, but how the nation does response to a catastrophic disaster.

And we're doing that in two areas. First and foremost, you know, our concrete foundation of our discipline is going to remain the same. Our priority will be lifesaving. You know, we're going to initiate action and we're going to gain and maintain situational awareness. We're going to establish our unified footprint with our partners and we're going to deliver those immediate lifesaving life sustaining services and commodities. But from emergency management at large, where do we, where do we refocus our efforts? So priorities, lifesaving, our efforts need to be centered and focused on the stabilization of community lifelines. There are seven basic community lifelines, um, and they range from a communications to emergency power and fuel, food, water and shelter and transportation, health and medical safety and security and a hazardous waste. You know, one of the, uh, one of the recommendations are one of the findings that came out of the after action report was a lack of situational awareness, primarily focused on, uh, Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria.

So, if we have not just a FEMA and not just our Commonwealth state partners and local partners, but if we have the machine focused on what initially are the impacts of those lifelines, and these are things that happened in the community every day. We will, you know, further our capability and capacity to obtain information and then apply resources to stabilize that. The second effort in the revision will be to truly incorporate the private sector into our planning, both deliberate planning, operational planning, logistical planning in everything we do, um, to truly stabilize after an incident of this size or even a bigger incident. We're utilizing this after action to prepare our nation for catastrophic events such as the New Madrid Earthquake or Cascadia Earthquake and others. It will be an industry led effort. So what the, a revision to the national response framework, what we're recommending moving forward is to take that industry lead effort and start incorporating that into emergency lead, excuse me, publicly lead in emergency management. We're already doing the steps to take that forward. We've partnered with, our partners within DHS at the national protection and programs directorate, you know, we're already working across those lines to, to build that, um, what, what the, uh, after action showed in specifically in, in Hurricane Maria, as you know, our problems don't necessarily fit into our ESF, emergency support function structure. But our emergency support function structure, our partners, they're solid. We have to now task, organize around that problem and, and meet the needs. So we're very excited about the opportunities and possibilities that will bring. We feel like bringing more partners into our, our 10, if you will, will, will further our capability and capacity to do that. Um, you know, some other changes that we've made or modifications we made a, we now fully understand that for our island states and Commonwealth and territories, we have to have a larger footprint from an emergency management commodity standpoint.

So just in Puerto Rico where we had one warehouse going into 2017 with some commodities, we now have five on the island, now we have enough food and water and emergency supplies to sustain days and not just hours. What that will do for us, as a responsible organization in response in its industry, it will allow us to better coordinate with the private sector when we have limited capability to move in limited capability to receive in our locations. And we're confident that we can become enablers to what the private sector is already doing day to day that will better support the Americans that we have out there.

So many recommendations that we're already putting in place, you know, one of the highlights of the, the after action points out is it focuses on planning and uh, you know, it's, it's been in recent reports, we used the 2012 a hurricane plan and, and we did, um, but, you know, also we have to remember it, it, uh, it doesn't, discount the fact that the tremendous crisis action planning that went on down range, in every storm, you have to assess what's going on the ground. You have to then task, organize and move out, you know, if the plan had been written the day of a Hurricane, Maria, and several factors would have exceeded our planning assumptions at the time. It was a truly catastrophic disaster, you know what we also learned is a, you know, powers the key. You know, the sustaining power outage on the Commonwealth was probably 80 to 90 percent of the issues we faced. We installed a record amount of generators, over 2000 generators installed and many of those generators will remain in place and they're there to quickly restore emergency power to those critical facilities. So, you know, uh, this document came out in July, Katherine and her team, you know, just tremendous amount of effort that goes into producing a document of this magnitude. I commend all of our staff, but I commend the leadership of the agency to clearly point out what we did right, clearly point out where we need to improve and I can assure you were making those improvements today.

**Mark Peterson:** You know, I want to go into some of those improvements and actually the after action report itself. I think sometimes when we think about these reports, maybe the public thinks about them in terms of pass fail- you did this well and this not well. Can you put it into context, your assessment of the report itself?

**Jeff Byard:** You know, I think first and foremost, and Katherine, you jump in at any time, this is not a pass or fail business. Everything, disasters are disasters for reasons you know, they disrupt our normal way of life. They overwhelm at every level. The amount of resources or first responders that you may have, that's a disaster, an incident, you have enough to meet the need a disaster. It overwhelms what those needs may be. So we have to understand that going into context, and I go back to this, that that further amplifies the administrators need for cultural preparedness events of this nature or we have to become and develop a national unity of effort. We have to think of these in terms of this not a FEMA issue. It's not a DoD issue, it's not a state if you fill in the blank issue.

It's a national issue and it takes all Americans working together at every level of government and the private sector to overcome the needs. So we really hope that that's what this is. So everything in the document has context to it, you know, everything in the document. We always focus on and you know, and there, there are some definite reasons why we need to focus on Maria and the Virgin Islands because of the logistical aspects and the distance to travel both by ear and see, but we also can't forget that, you know, we had a major impact in Texas, you know, an impact of such that impacted, the state of Texas in three different areas that each one of those would have met their per capita threshold for public assistance. And that's a tremendous impact.

We also had a category four hurricane impact the state of Florida. We registered more Americans than we have in history. You can't put a pass or fail on it. You have to say, you did this right, you need to improve here where some things legislatively we need, you know, we need partnerships in housing. We need to have the ability to bring in our state partners through grant authority housing. We have to expand our footprint when it comes to certain areas. And I think this document starts the discussion and it leads us down the path to a better system, across our nation.

**Katherine Fox:** So what I would add to that, first of all, I agree with everything that Jeff has said. The way that I describe the mission of emergency management is that it's our responsibility to deal with everything that was going on across society on a day that something really bad happens. And in 2017 we saw that happen on a sustained period of time in numerous different locations across the country. So what we really tried to do with the report is set that context and of course we're going to see some challenges with that. Of course we're going to see some areas where we're going to need to build our capacity. And even more importantly, I think that the capacity of our state and local partners as well as individuals, there's no way that any one agency or one jurisdiction can have everything that it needs. So the really critical thing that we saw is the importance of working together. And how we can do that even better than we have in the past. You know, some of the findings, look at how we're doing in terms of making progress on initiatives we started around and even before Hurricane Sandy, and that we had to make some major adaptations to make sure that we were as flexible as possible in delivering our programs.

**Mark Peterson:** I'd like to go back to something that Jeff mentioned earlier, which is plans and I think there is a notion that FEMA must have a plan for every specific scenario that nearly you can imagine. I think there might be some expectation of that in the public, but can you talk about you, you mentioned this a little bit, the crisis action planning, but like if there is a scenario that evolves that is something sort of beyond our imagination at the time. How does FEMA treat that? How does FEMA go about planning in the moment?

**Jeff Byard:** Right. So first what we used to imagine, we're now reimagining. So, uh, you know, as, as with the after action report two of the focus areas were dealing around, you know, concurrent complex instant. So all of our plans and our challenge at the planners within our Office of Response and Recovery down to our regional response and recovery planners to, you know, when you develop a plan, what, you know, what if, what if that happens and then what if something else happens. The beauty of what we bring are one of the definite strengths that we bring to the table from FEMA is our ability to rapidly assess the needs on the ground, rapidly assess the situation on the ground and then develop through our incident action planning process, you know, those immediate objectives that must be accomplished in the immediate resources that are needed to accomplish the lifeline and in building our effort at the national and the regional and the state level focused on the stabilization of lifelines will better inform those crisis action planners on the ground so that they're not just looking at one day they said they're looking at multiple data sets and they have more tools in the toolbox, if you will, to understand what resources may be moving that don't have a government tag on them. And, uh, we're excited about that. So you know, that, uh, we're never going to get away and nor should we ever get away or lose our skill set to do an immediate crisis action planning at multiple levels. But specifically when you're on the ground working with your state and local partners,

**Mark Peterson:** The after action report identifies 18 key findings across five focus areas. And one of those focus areas is staffing, concurrent and complex incidences. How we label it. I want to talk about staffing because we did something really robust during the hurricane seasons with the surge capacity force. Could you two talk a little bit about how FEMA augments its own staff to respond to these storms?

**Katherine Fox:** Sure. So one of the things that we started around Hurricane Sandy was called our FEMA qualification system. We also used for the first time a surge capacity force across the Department of Homeland Security. Um, so bringing in some of our colleagues from other components in DHS for this season, we expanded that significantly and drew on colleagues across the federal government. So we had folks from NASA, we had folks from all sorts of different agencies. I'm down on the ground helping us out. Um, in addition to that, I think one of the things that's most exciting we have, uh, a challenge from the administrator to develop something called the national qualification system and this goes back to what Jeff has been talking about in terms of unity of effort. How do we make sure that from the state level to the local level on up to the federal level that we're talking about what skill set we need and what it takes to be able to provide that skillset.

So for the first time ever we tested that concept out a bit. We drew in personnel from four different states and use that to augment FEMA’s workforce. And we're drawing experienced personnel from various different state emergency managers or state response agencies. They have the experience and we were able to use them on the ground in the types of environments that they're used to working in when we weren't necessarily able to fill the needs. And I think that that kind of partnership is exactly where we need to go in the future.

**Jeff Byard:** Yeah and Mark I want to add to that if I may on a few, few fronts. So, um, you know, we have staffing levels and as the report indicated, we were below a staffing levels for 2017 and we're below staffing levels now in 2018 and we're going to be below to staffing levels in 2019. So how do we look at accomplishing the mission given the resources we have and not look at number of bodies. First and foremost, we have to make sure we're, we're hiring and making sure we have enough staff in the right areas. And logistics is one of those key functions that we have to be able to do. So we are increasing our staffing levels and logistics primarily to provide teams downrange in the event that you know, our state or local partners cannot do that logistic last mile, a similar to what we saw in the Commonwealth.

But that could be, that's our common planning factor now and we know a majority of the times that it will have that ability to partner, but we have to be ready for the times when we don't and that was a key lesson learned moving forward. Going on a little bit about what Katherine said, just a personal story, when Hurricane Sandy hit, I think it was 2012, I had the ability, me and eight other emergency managers from Alabama, we're actually called up to Sandy under FEMA’s contract for FEMA and it was cumbersome to get moving. But, once we got on the ground, you know, we provided a tremendous amount of relief to the federal teams already doing a great job, but we also were able to bring back a lot of lessons to our home state.

And I am convinced that the best emergency managers in our nation reside at the state and local level. We we want to work closely with our counterparts with the emergency management assistance compact. We fully believe in what the administrator, you know, is laid out, that it’s the best models locally executed state, managed in federally supported. However, there will be times in our country, there will be disasters that we face where we have to marshal and rally all forces, all emergency managers to, to meet the need all available emergency managers. So we want to develop through the national qualification system a rapid way to first credential and understand what we have and then second a to a roster and employ our state and local partners. And we have a great model with our urban search and rescue teams where they're federally supported and there they're a made up of state and local first responders.

We want to look at how we do that with our incident management assistant teams. We want to look at how we do that with certain positions in external affairs and others that have a unique skillset and crisis communication that we need to rally and do that. So we're excited about that. So when we talk about staffing levels, we cannot look just inwardly we had to look at and have plans and procedures for available resources, not just FEMA resources. And I think that that's the mind shift that the administrator indefinitely, the mind shift that we have in response and recovery is, you know, what we planned for, it needs to be a national unity of effort focused around stabilization and what resources can we do to bring that to quickly bring resources to bear.

**Mark Peterson:** What's the takeaway for the public and for the emergency management community from this after action report?

**Katherine Fox:** So I think there are a couple of critical takeaways. First of all is a building that culture of preparedness upfront. So from the individual level to the local government level to the state level all the way up to FEMA and the federal level. I think we are, as Jeff said, FEMA does not operate in a vacuum, nor should we try to be the answer to every challenge that we faced this past season and what we need to do is make sure that we are empowering people and jurisdictions to be able to be ready to address some of those issues. So things like local governments having pre-event contracts in place, building a culture of preparedness, including like a rainy day kind of fund that states can take away from it. So I think that that's the start and then I think the other critical takeaway is when we're thinking about what we need to prepare for collectively, we need to be thinking about how we get the, the nation ready for a catastrophic level event. We've never seen anything like 2017 before and there are all sorts of different potential scenarios out there. Cascadia, New Madrid, that sort of thing that we need to constantly be looking at what does the country need and how can we help facilitate getting the resources that already exist into where they need to go.

**Jeff Byard:** Just a few points I would like to add to that is first and foremost, you know, it's an honor and a blessing to lead the men and women of FEMA every day and every day we get better than we did the last day. And that's it. That's a constant. The after action report is a truly transformative document that is going to lead to a better system in our country. I would also make sure that we understand this at all levels. You know, when you do an after action, don't shy away from it. You know, the minute we stop doing those hard reviews on ourselves and, obviously, you know, there's those out there that, you know, honestly, they want to see us fail. Don't let that at any level of stop you from as a leadership level of taking that hard look at yourself and making those improvements. You don't do it for any other reason, but to improve the system, to better deliver services to the American people. And the minute you lose that focus then you need to get that back, you know, what we do every day is strive to have a better system in place for our citizens and to ensure that our cost constitutional form of government will continue in a catastrophic day.

**Mark Peterson:** We've linked to this episode on our FEMA Facebook page and we invite you to join the conversation in the comments. If you have ideas for a future topic, send us an email @fema-podcastatfemadotdhs.gov. If you would like to learn more about this episode or other topics, visit fema.gov/podcast.