

FEMA Administrator's Remarks at the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) 80th Annual Convention

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Thank you, President Sharp, for that kind introduction.

It is an honor to be here in New Orleans to for NCAI's 80th Convention and Marketplace. This is my second NCAI convention, and let me tell you, it's good to be back to speak with you.

And, more importantly, listen to you and continue to improve FEMA's support of Tribal Nations.

Since I last spoke with you in Washington, DC, my team and I have had tremendous opportunities to travel throughout Indian Country.

We've held consultations, trainings, and worked with you. Together, we are creating tailored strategies to ensure Tribal Nations have the tools they need to help tribal citizens before, during, and after disasters.

In March, we held the 8th Annual Tribal Nations Training Week at the Center for Domestic Preparedness, with over 200 students from over 75 Tribal Nations.

It gave us a critical opportunity to hear from you directly on how we can update the disaster declaration process and improve Tribal access to recovery resources.

In June I traveled to the homelands of the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians, the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians to meet with their leadership in beautiful Northern Michigan, my home state!

I had very direct conversations with leadership about what we at FEMA can do to today to improve our support of Tribal Nations.



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And in August I traveled to the Inter-Tribal Emergency Management Coalition Convention on the Muscogee Creek Nation reservation.

There, I had the opportunity to learn about their work coordinating and supporting not only fellow Tribal Nations but local and state governments when disasters strike.

I cannot overstate how important it is for me and my team to travel to Indian Country to learn from you and to build our relationships.

All this is to say, it's been a whirlwind of a year, and together we've made incredible progress. But we still have a lot of work to do to make sure that we at FEMA are living up to our treaty and trust responsibilities.

Today, I want to walk you through some of the steps we've taken to make sure your needs are met and alert you to new opportunities we have to enhance your resilience, response, and recovery capabilities.

Let's start with the first, FEMA National Tribal Strategy.

When I stood in front of you in DC, we had just announced this first-of-its kind roadmap to redefine how we as an agency can better meet the needs of Tribal Nations.

As FEMA Administrator, I have made a commitment to instill equity in all of the work we do across the agency, so that we may better meet the climate resilience and preparedness needs of all communities.

That commitment extends to Indian Country, which is why we worked with you to create the National Tribal Strategy in 2022.

This living document serves as an acknowledgement of the important role you play when it comes to keeping your Tribal citizens safe.

It also reiterates our commitment to supporting and strengthening the good work you are already doing.

And we've been making big strides to uphold this pledge. Over the past year, I've had the immense privilege of visiting with many of you across Indian Country. I've



gotten to listen and learn about your unique needs and challenges.

From the Chickasaw Nation in the South to the Santo Domingo Pueblo in the Southwest.

The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians in the Southeast to the Mashantucket Pequot Tribe in the Northeast.

And the Native Village of Ouzinkie and Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes in Alaska, my team and I have visited with many Tribal Nations and learned about their unique cultures, histories, and governments.

We have seen the ways they are protecting their tribal citizens and their neighbors.

And we know that emergency management and climate resilience are not new concepts to Tribal Nations. You have been practicing both before the United States was formed.

I have witnessed your resilience and Traditional Ecological Knowledge in action. I have also let my teams know where we as FEMA can strengthen your resilience through our programs and services, as well as through our engagement.

I know I can speak for both myself and the entire FEMA workforce when I say that this year of engagement—and this work as a whole—has been incredibly enlightening and fulfilling.

And today, I am excited to announce that we are releasing a three-page report highlighting what we have accomplished to date.

Included in this report is a synopsis of how we are building Tribal Nation capabilities and capacity in the face of escalating and more severe disasters.

It also notes our progress over the past year, in educating and improving the FEMA workforce that serves Indian Country.

I would be remiss not to highlight the work we've done at FEMA to support our tribal affairs staff, both at headquarters and regionally, to further our commitments to Tribal Nations.



These dedicated members of the FEMA Family have been traveling across Indian Country over the past year—logging lots of miles and time on the ground—to meet with you in-person at your tribal headquarters.

A map of their travel and engagements with Tribal Nations across is also available in this report so you can see the work we're doing to support you.

And I promise you; we have taken all of the feedback you've given us to heart. We are taking the lessons you have taught us, and incorporating them into our policies, practices, and procedures.

And as a result of these engagements, we are building out language in our policy directives that puts the needs of Tribal Nations front and center, instead of forcing your communities to fit into a state-focused mold.

I want to thank our FEMA tribal liaisons and tribal FEMA Integration Teams, especially those who are here today, for this taking on this massive effort.

And I also want to thank all of your Nations for welcoming them and being great partners in as we work to improve our services.

Our goal has always been to identify barriers that are making it harder for you to access our programs and promptly remove them. We want to help you use our resources to better strengthen your resilience to keep your entire community safe.

I also want to assure you that these critical communication channels aren't just open at the staff level.

It has been a priority of mine to be in touch with Tribal Leaders in advance of extreme weather events and during the response and recovery process.

Let me take you back to this past August, for a moment. I'm sure you all remember the horrific fires that engulfed historic parts of Maui and native Hawaiian community. It was the worst U.S. fire in over a century.

And while I know that NCAI does not represent the Native Hawaiian Community, the advocacy work you have done with us has impacted the work we do to support indigenous people across the country.



As you know, that fire destroyed traditional lands on Maui. So, when we went out there to assess the damage, we brought with us a cultural advisor to help us better connect, understand, and address the unique needs of the Native Hawaiian community.

This work to connect with indigenous peoples, and make sure their needs are not only heard, but centered in our work, has a direct tie to the advocacy and work you have done to help FEMA better support your Nations.

So there we were in August, getting ready to fly to Hawaii to begin the response and recovery process.

But what some in this room may not remember is that, at the same time, we were also looking at a rare Category 4 hurricane bearing down on the West Coast!

So, as I was preparing to leave, I made sure we were able to send a letter directly from me to all 60 Tribal Nations in the path of Hurricane Hilary to assure them of FEMA's support before, during, and after the storm.

And just a month later, as Hurricane Lee charted a historic course toward New England, I made personal calls to the leadership of the four Tribal Nations that were in the Hurricane's path, to open the lines of communication as they prepared for the storm.

My point in telling you this is to illustrate my promise, and indeed FEMA's promise, to support you in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disasters. And this partnership is more important than ever.

Climate-related disasters have grown more and more severe in recent years. And 2023 has been a prime example of how these extreme weather events can threaten communities, harm people, and damage infrastructure.

The price tag on this year's disaster season has already topped 24 billion dollars.

The increased tempo of natural hazards, coupled with chronic problems Tribal Nations across Indian Country face—like drought or extreme heat and cold—are making it harder for tribal emergency managers to keep up.



Though our disaster landscape is uncertain, one thing is crystal clear: We can no longer plan based on historic risk.

We must now take a page out of Tribal Nations' books on preparing for future generations and prepare to address weather events ten, twenty, and even thirty years from now.

One of the ways we are doing this is by working with you to update the Tribal Disaster Declarations Guidance.

Upon its creation, the Guidance provided Tribal Nations with the long overdue tribal pathway to request their own Presidential Disaster Declarations. It expedites federal funding and helps you recover from disasters more effectively and efficiently.

As part of the National Tribal Strategy, in January, we started the process of updating that Guidance, so Tribal Nations across the country can better access disaster resources when they need it most.

And in keeping to our commitment to you, we have worked with Tribal Nations every step of the way.

To date, we have held eight government-to-government tribal consultations and tribal listening sessions across Indian Country. These sessions, both in-person and virtual, have provided us with critical input from all of you.

We have learned that the \$250,000 threshold is unworkable for many Nations.

Many of you told us that the non-federal cost share requirements make it impossible for some Nations to even think of going for their own declaration.

We have also heard that the current administrative burdens are so time and labor intensive that some Nations have decided to forgo reimbursement altogether, even after they obtained a declaration.

I've heard this feedback from you, directly, and it breaks my heart to know that we are missing the mark when it comes to supporting your communities when you need it the most.



But I can tell you this, we are taking all of your comments into consideration as we make final decision on the new Guidance.

On that note, I want to personally invite all of you to join our last consultation on this Guidance, which is taking place this afternoon at 3:15 pm in room 245.

We are also hosting a second consultation on our Mitigation Planning Policy on Thursday afternoon.

We are working to ensure that we are living by “nothing about us without us” but we need you there to help us get this right.

So, I hope we can see all of you at both consultations as we craft policies that make sense for Tribal Nations across Indian Country—policies that we expect to announce in 2024.

Our partnership is so important, not only are we at FEMA working hard to create Tribal-focused opportunities to help you strengthen resilience in your communities and build your emergency management capacity.

But we are also continuing to learn lessons from you in how to best build resilience to meet the demands of the future.

Now, before I wrap up, I want to take a moment to talk to you all about the importance of training.

Training is at the core of resilience, response, and recovery. It helps fill gaps in your workforces to make sure your communities are safer and more secure.

That’s why I’m excited to announce that registration for FEMA’s 9th Tribal Nations Training Week is now open.

For nearly a decade, FEMA has provided this up front, no-cost, in-person training for tribal leaders, tribal emergency managers, communications, IT, grants, health care staff and even Indian Health Services his staff.

It’s an incredible opportunity to gain necessary emergency certifications, learn from fellow Tribal Nations, and build your emergency management network across Indian Country.



Let me highlight why this training is so important. Before the pandemic Tribal Nation medical staff and IHS staff had an opportunity to train on protocols and practices for highly infectious diseases.

And when COVID-19 began to spread, this training became not only useful, but lifesaving.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of Tribal Nations Training Week. And I encourage everyone in this room to take advantage of this opportunity if you have not done so already.

Pending critical disaster needs, I hope to see you at the traditional tribal feast to kick off next year's Training Week.

We have FEMA staff at a booth in the NCAI marketplace., They can provide you with more information and even help you register.

Finally, I want to take a moment to thank all of you.

Thank you to the tribal leaders, emergency managers, and staff who, in times of crisis, stepped into emergency management roles for your Nations.

When disaster strikes you have saved the lives and livelihoods of your tribal citizens, your neighbors, friends, and loved ones.

You have also been crucial partners of ours—your advocacy has helped guide FEMA as we improve our programs and policies to not only meet, but exceed our treaty and trust responsibilities.

I appreciate the important work that you do. And I want to continue working with you to ensure that you have the tools you need to be successful.

I believe, that if we continue to work together and improve, we can transform FEMA into the agency that Indian Country needs and deserves.

Thank you, again, to President Sharp, the NCAI Leadership, and tribal leaders for inviting me to speak with you today. I wish you a successful and productive 80th Annual Convention!

