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## **FEMA Review Council – Disaster Response and Recovery Sub-Committee**

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**On behalf of:** North Carolina Office of State Fire Marshal (OSFM) and the National Association of State Fire Marshals (NASFM)

### **Introduction**

Thank you for the opportunity to share input with the FEMA Review Council’s Disaster Response and Recovery Sub-Committee.

FEMA plays a vital role in keeping Americans safe, but its success depends on recognizing the critical role of the U.S. Fire Service. Firefighters are the first to respond when disaster strikes and the last to leave during recovery. They are trusted in every community, trained across multiple disciplines, and essential at every stage of disaster operations.

Despite this, the fire service currently has no dedicated voice on the FEMA Review Advisory Council. This is a serious gap, and I offer the following recommendations to strengthen FEMA’s structure and effectiveness.

### **Recommendations for FEMA Reform**

#### **1. Elevate the U.S. Fire Administrator**

- The U.S. Fire Administrator should report directly to the Secretary of Homeland Security.
- This ensures FEMA decisions reflect real-world operations and frontline realities.

#### **2. Give the Fire Service a Seat on the Council**

- Firefighters are the nation’s largest and most widespread emergency response network.
- A permanent fire service seat ensures FEMA reforms include the experience of those who lead disaster response every day.

#### **3. Build Public-Private Partnerships into FEMA’s Framework**

- FEMA should have clear processes to integrate private resources—such as communications systems, helicopters, and heavy equipment—without delay.
- During Hurricane Helene, private partners restored communications and delivered lifesaving aid to isolated communities.

#### **4. Cut Through Bureaucratic Delays**

- FEMA must simplify approval processes for resource deployment.
- Local responders often wait days or weeks for federal approval, even when private or state resources are available immediately.

## **FEMA Functions to Preserve**

Several core FEMA functions should remain strong and fully supported:

- **Planning, Mitigation, and Recovery Programs:** Help reduce risk before disasters and support rebuilding afterward.
- **Training and Coordination:** Connect federal, state, and local responders for nationwide preparedness.
- **Direct Funding Streams:** Keep local fire departments and emergency services ready with grants and essential resources.

## **Case Study: Hurricane Helene**

When Hurricane Helene struck North Carolina on September 27, 2024, it devastated the western mountains. Entire counties were cut off by flooding and landslides. More than 100 lives were lost, and communications and infrastructure were down for weeks.

Three lessons stand out:

1. **Public-Private Partnerships Save Lives**
  - Starlink systems, delivered through private partners, restored communications in isolated areas.
  - Without helicopters and donated equipment, many needs would have gone unmet.
2. **Bureaucracy Delays Recovery**
  - Water restoration took weeks, even though private partners could have done it in 24 hours.
  - Requests for a fire base camp were denied, forcing the state to coordinate independently.
3. **Community Trust Matters**
  - Residents often resisted outside agencies.
  - Firefighters, as trusted community members, were welcomed and able to deliver resources directly.

These lessons show why the U.S. Fire Service must be fully integrated into FEMA's decision-making.

## **Conclusion**

Every state faces disasters that overwhelm government capacity—whether fires, floods, hurricanes, or man-made incidents. FEMA's effectiveness depends on leveraging the reach, trust, and expertise of the fire service, while preserving FEMA's existing strengths.

I respectfully recommend:

- Elevating the U.S. Fire Administrator to report directly to the Secretary of Homeland Security.
- Establishing permanent fire service representation on the FEMA Review Advisory Council.
- Embedding public-private partnerships into FEMA policy and practice.
- Streamlining federal processes to eliminate delays during response and recovery.