

HIRING/RETENTION

Concerns mount over FEMA staff reductions

The recent cut of 50 FEMA "CORE" staff come as the Trump administration has contemplated much deeper cuts to the disaster response workforce.



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Concerns mount over FEMA staff reductions



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The Federal Emergency Management Agency's workforce continues to face uncertainty amid abrupt cuts to disaster response staff and planning emails that show FEMA has been contemplating deeper reductions.

Late last month, FEMA sent non-renewal notices to 50 cadre of On-Call Response/Recovery Employees (CORE) whose terms ended between

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FEMA did not respond to a request for comment. In other stories on the CORE cuts, a FEMA spokesman has characterized them as “a routine staff adjustment of 50 staff out of 8,000.”

But a current FEMA supervisor and former FEMA supervisor, who were granted anonymity to candidly discuss the situation, both disputed the characterization of the terminations as “routine.”

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They said FEMA CORE staff are almost always renewed due to demand for staff to respond to an increasing rate of disasters and other agency tasks in recent years.

CORE staff are often among the first FEMA employees to be deployed in a disaster, according to Rafael LeMaitre, a former FEMA director of public affairs who now serves on the advisory council for the advocacy group Sabotaging Our Safety.

“While they serve two-year contract terms, those are routinely renewed, because the number of disasters that the nation has been dealing with has not gone down,” LeMaitre said. “If anything, it’s increased, both in the number of disasters and the severity of disasters, given changes to the climate, and frankly, additional pressures that FEMA has been put under to respond to non-traditional types of emergencies.”

But the FEMA supervisors also described how, contrary to the recent non-renewals, decisions about extending CORE appointments are typically done on a case-by-case basis. The process typically includes an analysis of the employee’s workload and the need for them to continue working on a given disaster.

“We never fire people just because their renewal dates happened to fall in a given time frame,” the current FEMA supervisor said.

The renewal process typically starts 90 days before the employee’s “not-to-exceed” date, which refers to when their term ends.

But in early December, emails show FEMA divisions and regions received a tasking from the agency’s chief human capital office to submit justification packages for every CORE staff with an NTE date falling in January.

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Workforce reductions exercise

The cuts and uncertainty around CORE staff renewals come as FEMA has been analyzing much deeper cuts to its workforce, agency emails show.

In a Dec. 23 email viewed by Federal News Network, FEMA's chief human capital office sought leadership input on a "Workforce Capacity Planning Exercise." The email references how the exercise is "consistent" with a recent executive order and corresponding White House [guidance](https://www.opm.gov/chcoc/latest-memos/guidance-on-executive-order-14356-ensuring-continued-accountability-in-federal-hiring.pdf) (<https://www.opm.gov/chcoc/latest-memos/guidance-on-executive-order-14356-ensuring-continued-accountability-in-federal-hiring.pdf>) on federal hiring.

The email included a "draft workforce plan" with a table laying out FEMA's workforce totals as of Sept. 30 and fiscal 2026 "target" reductions.

The reductions listed in that table include a 50% overall reduction to FEMA's total workforce of 23,000, including a 15% reduction the permanent full-time workforce and a 41% reduction to the disaster full-time workforce, which includes CORE staff.

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The email states that the exercise is "pre-decisional in nature" and that "no staffing actions or personnel decisions are being directed or implemented as part of this request."

But current and former FEMA staff say it would be highly unusual to conduct such an exercise without planning for some form of workforce reductions.

The Washington Post first reported on the workforce planning email.

FEMA cuts criticized

The latest FEMA cuts come after a year of turmoil at the agency that saw more than 2,000 employees depart through voluntary programs and some terminations. Those departures included two dozen senior leaders, according to the [Government Accountability Office](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-25-108598). (<https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-25-108598>)

The Trump-appointed FEMA Review Council's report has been delayed, [leaving to question the administration's long-term plan for FEMA](https://federalnewsnetwork.com/reorganization/2025/12/former-fema-leaders-call-for-clarity-amid-delayed-council-report/). (<https://federalnewsnetwork.com/reorganization/2025/12/former-fema-leaders-call-for-clarity-amid-delayed-council-report/>)

However, both President Donald Trump and Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem have expressed a desire to eliminate or downsize FEMA, and instead shift more disaster recovery responsibilities to state and local governments.

Democrats in Congress were quick to criticize the latest FEMA CORE cuts and reports of deeper potential reductions.

"Even considering cuts of this scale is more evidence of the Trump administration's reckless and dangerous behavior and sends a clear message that the administration is willing to gamble with Americans' lives and violate federal law that Congress passed to ensure readiness for disasters," House Homeland Security Committee Ranking Member Bennie Thompson (D-Miss.) said in a statement.

House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Ranking Member Rick Larsen (D-Wash.) is among the lead sponsors of a bipartisan bill to overhaul FEMA. The legislation would notably remove FEMA out from under the Department of Homeland Security and have it report directly to the president.

"After multiple Transportation and Infrastructure Committee hearings, we keep concluding FEMA needs more staff to meet the response needs of more frequent and severe disasters — like the recent flooding in my district," Larsen said in a statement. "Cutting CORE staff will leave

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