



MINORITY STAFF
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Fact Sheet

DHS IG Found FEMA Systems for Deploying Personnel and Supplies to Disaster Zones Inadequate; FEMA Director Brown Disputed Findings

Two months before Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, the Inspector General of the Department of Homeland Security warned FEMA that its systems for managing the personnel and equipment dispatched to disaster sites were inadequate. According to the report, FEMA's information management systems were overwhelmed by the four hurricanes that struck Florida in 2004. Instead of committing to remedy the problems that the report identified, FEMA Director Michael Brown disputed nearly all its findings. Mr. Brown claimed that FEMA systems were “highly performing” and “well managed.”

Inspector General Findings

The Inspector General's report found that FEMA's information systems did not communicate with each other and could not track information on deployment of personnel, equipment, and supplies in real time. According to the report:

- “During the 2004 hurricanes, FEMA systems did not provide staff with real-time capabilities for tracking deployments of personnel, equipment, and supplies.” A major problem is that three systems used to make mission assignments, deploy personnel, and dispatch equipment and supplies do not interact. This “lack of integration ... hinders FEMA from providing the appropriate number and combination of people and supplies to meet the level of need at disaster locations.”
- FEMA's database for logistics management “provides no tracking of essential commodities, such as ice and water, needed by disaster victims. As a result, FEMA cannot readily determine its effectiveness in achieving DHS' specific disaster response goals and whether or not there is a need to improve.”
- When items “are identified for deployment,” the system “does not indicate when they will be shipped and when they should arrive.” For example, “[b]ecause there was no automated way to coordinate quantities of commodities with the people

available to accept and distribute them, millions of dollars of ice was left unused at staging areas in Florida; and, about \$1.6 million worth of leftover water had to be returned to the warehouse for storage.”

- The system “did not allow FEMA regional staff to keep track of emergency response personnel sent out to provide assistance at disaster locations.”

The report commended FEMA’s front-line employees for improvising solutions to the shortcomings of the systems, which were overwhelmed by the 2004 hurricanes in Florida. According to the report, during the 2004 hurricanes, the systems “did not effectively handle increased workloads, were not adaptable to change, and lacked needed capabilities. Accordingly, FEMA field personnel developed manual workarounds, adjusted processes, and created alternative IT methods to supplement existing response and recovery systems and operations. Consequently, this created operational inefficiencies and hindered the delivery of essential disaster response and recovery services.”

Michael Brown’s Response

The Inspector General provided a draft report to FEMA for comment in June 2005. According to this memorandum, on August 3, 2005, Michael Brown transmitted a response to the Inspector General, saying, “We have reviewed the rewrite of the Audit report and find it unacceptable.”

Mr. Brown’s response stated, “you reported on the significant achievements, high customer satisfaction, and high volume of processing. None of this would be possible if IT were poorly managed.” It also stated, “The overall tone of the report is negative ... and does not acknowledge the highly performing, well managed and staffed IT systems supporting FEMA incident response and recovery.”

Inspector General’s Rebuttal

The Inspector General was not persuaded by Mr. Brown’s response. The report states that FEMA “incorrectly equates the agency’s ability to meet the disaster challenges to date with effective and efficient IT management. While we state in our report that [FEMA] was able to get through the 2004 hurricanes, we also recognize that FEMA’s accomplishments were not necessarily because of its IT systems, but often in spite of them. Users across [FEMA] consistently told us that they did not use the headquarters-supplied systems, but instead relied upon alternative methods, such as creating ad hoc spreadsheets and databases or resorting to manual methods, to perform their jobs. Where IT systems were used, they often did not operate effectively.”