

Climate-fueled disasters are increasing, FEMA chief warns

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With climate change fueling ever more weather-related disasters, the country needs to move away from basing its emergency preparedness plans on historical precedent and seek new models for future threats,

Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Deanne Criswell told lawmakers Tuesday.

"The number of hurricanes, the number of wildfires, the number of severe weather events continues to increase," Criswell said. "They've become more severe, more intense. They're intensifying more rapidly. And that's only going to continue to get worse."

Criswell appeared before the House Committee on Oversight and Reform during a hearing focused on the FEMA response to Hurricane Ida.

The fifth strongest hurricane to ever make landfall in the continental United States, Ida highlighted a number of important considerations for policymakers, the FEMA chief said.

"Mitigating the effects of [climate change](#) is one of my top priorities for FEMA and Hurricane Ida has demonstrated the challenges presented by our changing climate, the benefits of mitigation investments and the importance of equity in our response and recovery," Criswell said.

Criswell described how the agency pre-positioned food, water and other supplies, but Ida's power still took many by surprise. Fueled by warmer-than-normal waters in the Gulf of Mexico, the storm's wind speeds rose from 85 mph to 150 mph in less than 24 hours. It continued as a major storm after landfall and eventually wreaked havoc across parts of the Northeast.

In the past, [state officials](#) typically could count on several days to implement response plans for an approaching storm.

"That timeframe is continuing to get shorter and shorter as these storms intensify more quickly," Criswell said.

Members of the panel asked her about efforts to address equity and environmental justice in federal disaster response, including recommendations that FEMA needs to better educate communities on funding available for mitigation projects and how to navigate what can be a complicated bureaucratic process.

Community resources

Criswell said she understands many communities don't have the resources to hire a specialist to help write competitive grant applications and cited an increase in directed technical assistance through the agency's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program that supports hazard mitigation projects. But she said they can always do more.

"I have asked my grants section here to take a look, an overarching look at all of our grant programs, to get a better understanding of where we are missing some communities, and then understand what the barriers are for them trying to reach out and ask for assistance so we can address that root cause of the problem," Criswell said.

She also said FEMA has taken steps to expand the kinds of documentation that residents can provide to show that they owned a property or lived at an address. That has been an issue in the past, particularly in poor areas of the South where land and deed records were not always kept up to date.

Ida also highlighted the importance of disaster mitigation projects. Criswell noted that the storm hit 16 years to the day after Hurricane Katrina but this time the levees around New Orleans held.

She suggested that reflects improvements that have been made to the levee system over time and cited figures on how upfront investment in

those kinds of mitigation efforts save much more money in the long term.

Committee Chairwoman Carolyn B. Maloney, D-N.Y., tied that to the Biden administration's infrastructure proposals. She also said she's re-introducing her legislation to require executive agencies to submit a climate change adaptation plan.

"This bill will ensure that communities have a say in how federal agencies implement their climate action plans, which is crucial in making sure our taxpayer dollars are put to work where they are most needed," she said.

The panel's top Republican,. Rep. James R. Comer, R-Ky., said he welcomed Criswell's appearance but suggested Democrats have resisted calling other top administration officials to answer tough questions on other crises facing the country.

"When will Democrats call the Department of Homeland Security Secretary Mayorkas to discuss the crisis along our southern border or Secretary of Defense Austin to explain the debacle that has been the Afghanistan withdrawal or someone to address the growing inflation created by the Biden administration that has gotten so bad that even stores like the Dollar Tree are raising prices on American consumers," Comer said.

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