

## **How will new FEMA climate change rule affect Wyo.?**

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### **Body**

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What will new FEMA **climate change** rule mean for Wyoming?

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At a glance

The Federal Emergency Management Agency recently announced a **change** in the way it provides funding to states for disaster preparedness. Starting next year, FEMA will require states to submit hazard mitigation plans that take the impacts of **climate change** into account. But it's unclear what impact that will have on states like Wyoming, where **climate change** remains far from a settled issue.

By James Chilton

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CHEYENNE - A majority of **climate** scientists agree that human activity is contributing to global **climate change**.

But the issue remains far from settled in the U.S. political sphere.

There, **climate change** has become a partisan issue with several Republican governors, including Wyoming's Gov. Matt Mead, taking stances against the idea of human-driven **climate change**.

Now the Federal Emergency Management Agency appears to have entered the fray.

Earlier this month, FEMA announced the release of a new guide for states to follow when drafting their "hazard-mitigation plans." It includes a fresh emphasis on **climate change**.

All 50 states must routinely submit hazard-mitigation plans to FEMA. The agency then must approve them before providing the federal funds that are used to help prepare states for various disasters.

Starting next year, FEMA will begin requiring the plans to recognize the impacts of **climate change** and the potential hazards that may result.

Susan Hendrick is a press secretary for FEMA. She said in an email Tuesday that Administrator W. Craig Fugate believes states need to focus on building infrastructure that can withstand not only the disasters of yesterday but of tomorrow as well.

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And evidence indicates to him that climate change will be a contributing factor in disasters to come.

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As Administrator Fugate

has said ? climate

change will make extreme weather events more frequent and more severe," Hendrick said.

"On average, more people die annually from flooding than any other natural hazard. Furthermore, with climate change, we anticipate that flooding risks will increase over time."

Wyoming is no stranger to flooding. Many Cheyenne residents recall the 1985 flood that killed 12 and caused tens of millions of dollars in damage.

Floods were also the cause of the state's most recent federal disaster declaration in July 2011, when 15 counties were hit by storms and landslides.

Flooding is one of the many potential disasters addressed in Wyoming's current hazard-mitigation plan. It was last approved by FEMA in 2011 and is up for renewal in 2016 - the same year the climate rule takes effect.

The 294-page document looks at Wyoming's climate and susceptibility to various disasters, including wildfires, earthquakes and drought. But nowhere in the document are "climate change" or "global warming" mentioned.

"We do have an area on climate, but it doesn't reference climate change," said Kelly Ruiz at the Wyoming Office of Homeland Security, which oversees disaster readiness. "A lot of it is based off past history; every jurisdiction has areas of concern."

Ruiz said that while the plan is only approved by FEMA once every five years, it is undergoing constant revision as stakeholders - the state Department of Transportation, state Geological Survey and Department of Engineers, among others - find new potential chinks in the state's disaster-preparedness armor.

But if the new FEMA rule sticks, the question becomes whether Wyoming's plan will recognize climate change when it comes up for approval next year.

Ruiz said she couldn't speak to that question because any plan Wyoming sends to FEMA would have to be approved by the governor. But she said she could summarize what Wyoming stands to lose if climate change remains a non-starter here.

Overall, the state gets only a tiny fraction of FEMA disaster-preparedness funds.

Last year, for example, Wyoming got just \$82,165, compared to New York's \$495.7 million. But those funds can vary from one year to the next, and they often balloon in years that follow a disaster.

In all, Ruiz said Wyoming has gotten about \$3 million in FEMA disaster-preparedness grants over the last 10 years.

Quite a bit of that has gone to Cheyenne, said the city's assistant engineer, Nathan Beauheim.

"We generally use it for flood control; it's the money we used to build the Dry Creek realignment and do the drainage work over by the Kohl's shopping center," he said.

The funds also were used for work on Crow Creek between I-180 and Morrie Avenue.

Since the application requirements for FEMA funds are robust, Beauheim said, the city doesn't always pursue them every year. Even so, Cheyenne has gotten several million dollars from FEMA over the last several years, both pre-disaster and floodplain management dollars.

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Back in Washington, Hendrick said that, even if states were to submit hazard-mitigation plans that don't acknowledge **climate change**, FEMA wouldn't just dismiss them out of hand.

"It wouldn't fall into a situation where you'd be hung out to dry and not receive any funds," she said, adding that FEMA would work with holdout states on their plans.

When asked for the governor's take on what the FEMA rule might mean for Wyoming, Mead's office declined comment until he has a chance to understand the implications of the **change**.

"The governor wants to study this issue further because there does seem to be some nuance to the regulations proposed by FEMA," wrote communications director David Bush in an email.

"He would like to have all the information before making a comment and will be looking into this with his staff."

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