



POLITICS

Trump proposes 'getting rid of FEMA' while touring disaster areas

1 of 20 | Speaking to reporters Friday at Asheville Regional Airport before meeting with local officials about the recovery from last year's Hurricane Helene, Trump said FEMA "has been a very big disappointment" and he's considering "getting

BY [WILL WEISSERT](#), [CHRIS MEGERIAN](#) AND [MAKIYA SEMINERA](#)

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LOS ANGELES (AP) — President [Donald Trump](#) surveyed disaster zones in California and North Carolina on Friday and said he was considering "getting rid of" the Federal Emergency Management Agency, offering the latest sign of how he is weighing sweeping changes to the nation's central organization for responding to disasters.

In [fire-ravaged](#) California, the state's Democratic leaders pressed Trump for federal assistance that he's threatened to hold up, some setting aside their past differences to shower him with praise. Trump, in turn, pressured local officials to waive permitting requirements so people can immediately rebuild, pledging that federal permits would be granted promptly.

Instead of having federal financial assistance flow through FEMA, the Republican president said Washington could provide money directly to the states. He made the comments while visiting [North Carolina](#), which is still recovering months after Hurricane Helene, on the first trip of his second term.

"FEMA has been a very big disappointment," the Republican president said. "It's very bureaucratic. And it's very slow."

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Trump was greeted in California by Gov. Gavin Newsom, a Trump critic whom the president frequently disparages. The duo chatted amiably and gestured toward cooperation despite their bitter history.

"We're going to need your support. We're going to need your help," Newsom told Trump. "You were there for us during COVID. I don't forget that, and I have all the expectations we'll be able to work together to get a speedy recovery."

Newsom has [praised Trump before](#) when looking for help from the federal government. In the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, he called Trump "thoughtful" and "collaborative."

Trump flew over several devastated neighborhoods in Marine One, the presidential helicopter, before landing in Pacific Palisades, a [hard-hit community](#) that's home to some of Southern California's rich and famous. Accompanied by first lady Melania Trump, he walked a street where all the houses have burned, chatting with residents and police officers.

It takes seeing the damage firsthand to grasp its enormity, Trump said after. The fires, which [continue to burn](#), could end up being the [costliest natural disasters in U.S. history](#).

"It is devastation. It really is an incineration," Trump said.

Trump's brief but friendly interaction with Newsom belied the confrontational stance he signaled toward California earlier in the day. Even on the plane en route to Los Angeles, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt was using Trump's disparaging nickname for the governor, "Newsom," and telling reporters "he has wronged the people of his state" and saying Trump was visiting to pressure Newsom and other officials "to do right by their citizens."

Trump said Los Angeles residents who lost their homes should be able to get back onto their properties immediately to clear them, adding several told him it will be months before they can rebuild.

Mayor Karen Bass said residents should be able to return home within the week, but keeping people safe from hazardous materials is a top priority. She said the city was easing the process to get permits, but she was repeatedly interrupted by Trump as she tried to explain the city's efforts. He downplayed the concerns about toxins, saying: "What's hazardous waste? We're going to have to define that."

Trump has a long history of minimizing the risks of asbestos. In his 1997 book, "The Art of the Comeback," Trump called asbestos "the greatest fireproofing material ever used" and "100% safe, once applied," and claimed the movement against the insulator was led by the mob, "because it was often mob-related companies that would do the asbestos removal."

Before flying to California, Trump reiterated that he wants to extract concessions from the Democratic-led state in return for disaster assistance, including changes to water policies and requirements that voters need to show identification when casting ballots.

Beyond Trump's criticism of FEMA, he's suggested limiting the federal government's role in responding to disasters, echoing comments from conservative allies who have proposed reducing funding and responsibility.

"I'd like to see the states take care of disasters," he said in North Carolina. "Let the state take care of the tomadoes and the hurricanes and all of the other things that happen."

Trump said Michael Whatley, a North Carolina native and chair of the Republican National Committee, would help coordinate recovery efforts in the state, where frustrations over the federal response have lingered. Although Whatley does not hold an official government position, Trump said he would be "very much in charge."

[FEMA helps respond](#) to disasters when local leaders request a presidential emergency declaration, a signal that the damage is beyond the state's ability to handle on its own. FEMA can reimburse governments for recovery efforts such as debris removal, and it gives stopgap financial assistance to individual residents.

Trump [has criticized](#) former President [Joe Biden](#) for his administration's response to Helene in North Carolina. As he left the White House on Friday morning, he told reporters that "it's been a horrible thing the way that's been allowed to fester" since the storm hit in September, and "we're going to get it fixed up."

In a small town in western North Carolina, residents told Trump about wading through waist-deep water to escape from their homes while fearing for their lives. Some have battled with insurance companies to get their losses covered.

"We've come to North Carolina with a simple message," Trump said. "You are not forgotten any longer. You were treated very badly by the previous administration."

FEMA has distributed \$319 million in financial assistance to residents, but that hasn't alleviated the feeling of abandonment among residents who are struggling to rebuild their lives.

Trump has showered California leaders with disdain for water policies that [he falsely claimed](#) worsened the recent blazes. He said he would "take a look at a fire that could have been put out if they let the water flow, but they didn't let the water flow." In Los Angeles, he met with members of Congress and local officials from both parties in a meeting that was at times [contentious](#).

Michael Coen, who served as chief of staff at FEMA during the Biden administration, said Trump was "misinformed" about an agency that provides critical help to states when they are overwhelmed by catastrophe.

In addition, Coen criticized the idea of attaching strings to assistance. "I think the American people expect the federal government will be there for them on their worst day, no matter where they live," he said.

Trump tapped Cameron Hamilton, a former Navy SEAL with limited experience managing natural disasters, as FEMA's acting director.

Friday's trip could prompt some uncomfortable conversations about climate change, which Trump has played down and denied. Both Helene and the Los Angeles wildfires were exacerbated by global warming.

In Helene's case, a study by international climate scientists at World Weather Attribution found that climate change [boosted the storm's rainfall by 10%](#). In California, the state suffered [a record dry fall and winter](#) — its traditional wet season — which made the area around Los Angeles more vulnerable to blazes.

"This is just breaking our comfort zone of what is supposed to be normal," said University of Oregon researcher Amanda Stasiewicz.

After visiting North Carolina and California, Trump plans to hold a rally Saturday in Las Vegas.

— Associated Press writers Stephen Groves, Seth Borenstein, Jonathan J. Cooper, Kathleen Ronayne and Jill Colvin contributed to this report.



WILL WEISSERT

Weissert covers national politics and the White House for The Associated Press. He is based in Washington.



CHRIS MEGERIAN

Megerian covers the White House for The Associated Press. He previously wrote about the Russia investigation, climate change, law enforcement and politics in California and New Jersey.



MAKIYA SEMINERA

Seminera is a state government reporter for The Associated Press. She is based in Raleigh, North Carolina.



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