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FEMA Announces Support for Legislative Change to Allow Tribal Governments to Directly Apply for Federal Disaster Aid

Under Current Law, Only Governors Can Apply For FEMA Aid; Legislative Change Would Recognize Tribal Sovereignty in Emergency Management

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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Today, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), under the direction of President Obama and Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, announced that it supports amending federal law to allow federally recognized tribal governments to make disaster declaration requests directly to the president. FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate first announced the administration's support for this change which would require Congressional action, at the 2011 Tribal Nations Conference hosted by the White House last week in Washington, D.C.

"Consistent with our strong government-to-government relationship, FEMA and the administration support amending the Stafford Act to allow federally recognized tribal governments to make a request directly to the president for a federal emergency or disaster declaration," said Fugate. "Tribal members are an essential part of the emergency management team, and amending the law would enhance FEMA's working relationship with tribal governments and improve emergency and disaster responsiveness throughout Indian Country. We look forward to actively working with our tribal partners and members of Congress to support and facilitate the passage of such a change in the law."

Under current law, only states, through the governor, can make disaster declaration requests directly to the president. Amending the law would acknowledge the sovereignty of federally recognized tribes and the trust relationship of the United States, and enhance FEMA's working relationship with tribal governments. Such a change would be another step in fulfilling the promise of a presidential memo issued by President Obama to improve the administration's support for tribal governments. Such a legislative change to the Stafford Act would allow a tribal government to choose whether to directly request a separate declaration or to receive assistance, as they do presently, under a declaration for a state.

FEMA, under the leadership of this administration, has committed to strengthening its engagement with American Indians and Alaska Natives, to better support tribal governments and Indian Country as we work to build more resilient and better prepared communities. FEMA has implemented regulations and policies that, once a disaster or emergency has been declared under the Stafford Act, allow federally recognized tribes to choose to become a direct grantee under FEMA's Public Assistance and Hazard Mitigation Grant programs.

As part of these efforts to work with tribal governments directly, during the past year, and as part of our continued commitment, FEMA has designated tribal liaisons in each of our ten regional offices, and hired an attorney who is educated, trained, and experienced in federal Indian law and emergency management to better support tribes before, during and after an emergency or disaster strikes. This has allowed us to more closely coordinate with tribes, and make sure they have the support they need while planning, preparing for, responding to and recovering from emergencies and disasters.

FEMA's mission is to support our citizens and first responders to ensure that as a nation we work together to build, sustain, and improve our capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards.

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3 Step Guide for Assistance

