Written by **Kelly Holt** on November 11, 2011

Do We Need Federal Agencies Such as FEMA?

The conflagration began in Bastrop County on September 4 when a downed tree sparked a power line. Given that Texas is in the midst of the most severe single-year drought since the 1950s, parched terrain and high temperatures provided the perfect fuel for immediate ignition. High winds spread the blaze at an alarming rate. It jumped the Colorado River and eventually destroyed nearly 1,600 homes and about 34,000 acres. Amazingly, only two people died as a result of the wildfire.

The fire burned a six-mile-wide and 16-mile-long swath between Bastrop (the county seat) and Smithville — with major damage in rural areas outside the limits of the two towns.

Private Response

For whatever reason, it appeared that tiny Smithville (pop. 4,000) was able to organize donation and volunteer efforts somewhat more quickly and efficiently than its troubled neighbors. Donations poured in from across the nation, and firefighters and volunteers didn't wait for invitations. As a volunteer, your reporter witnessed the remarkable phenomenon of every person seemingly being in the right place at the right time, doing the right thing. Church kitchens produced hundreds of meals daily for firefighters, volunteers, and evacuees; empty warehouse space was opened to accept, organize, and distribute donations; keys to necessary buildings appeared; and forklifts with operators showed up to transport donations to the appropriate places — all in clockwork fashion.

Initially, county fire departments worked for three days straight without assistance from the nearby capital city of Austin (dealing with four fires of its own). And for more than a week, Smithville managed its donations and distributions unaided by federal or even state resources.

In the meantime, Texas Governor Rick Perry had requested an extension of an earlier disaster declaration (originally issued in December 2010) to include the Bastrop County Complex fire. Because of the elevated wildfire threat in Texas, the declaration had been kept in place all year, and departments statewide had already responded to literally thousands of fires. So, when the extent of the Bastrop inferno became apparent, Texas appealed to Washington.

Smithville Fire Marshall Jack Page, also the town's Emergency Management Coordinator, explained the process of disaster declaration and FEMA assistance:

> The "declaration" of a major disaster is necessary in order to claim reimbursements from the federal government. After the state declares a disaster, it formally requests assistance from the federal government. Then when the government (the President) confirms the disaster, the request is forwarded to FEMA. Then FEMA can move in and begin to help in the form of individual or

> public assistance, which goes to municipalities for reimbursement of public resources, overtime for firefighters, extra fuel costs for the trucks, lost or damaged equipment, etc. FEMA reimburses 75 percent of the costs, and locally we're responsible for 25 percent of recovery costs.

All of which takes time. Smithville Mayor Mark Bunte reported, "It was about eight days before FEMA was functional with the state." By the time FEMA officials arrived, local efforts in Smithville were well under way and functioning efficiently.

The Problem with FEMA

But there were locals who questioned, not how, but whether FEMA should have been invited to help.

Federal management of emergencies has existed in the United States for over 200 years, but the modern agency known as FEMA was established as an independent agency (now serving within the Department of Homeland Security) and activated by executive order of President Carter in 1979. Over the years — through reorganizations, congressional assignment of increased responsibilities, and presidential executive orders — FEMA's authority has grown to include an astonishing array of duties, from dam safety to counterterrorism. But following the agency's colossal failure after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, its efforts were reevaluated.

In 2006, in answering the question of why FEMA failed so miserably in response to Katrina, Russell S. Sobel and Peter T. Leeson wrote for the Cato Institute an analysis of the agency entitled "Flirting with Disaster: The Inherent Problems with FEMA," outlining the real costs of looking to the federal government for help after a disaster.

Sobel and Leeson's report concluded that FEMA is inherently flawed — rife with problems of bureaucracy, poor coordination, and adverse incentives. They added, "Another important fact that must be realized is that natural disasters are prone to being politicized."

Concerning politicization, the Cato report observed that FEMA "will cater to those who determine their budgetary allocations rather than to the citizens they are supposed to serve. The incentive is to help themselves by distributing money in ways that benefit them and their political careers." The two authors participated in a study of all disasters from 1991-99 and found that states politically important to the President's reelection bid had a higher rate of disaster declaration. Data from recent incidents also confirm these statistics. For instance, Sobel and Leeson found that when Bill Clinton was seeking reelection in 1996, he declared a record-setting number (75) of major disasters. The second-highest year (68) was 2004 — George W. Bush's reelection year — when 90 percent of the increase in disaster declarations between 2003 and 2004 were in the 12 battleground states where five percent or less of the votes decided the election. The two men concluded that "nearly half of all disaster relief is motivated by politics rather than by need." Incredibly, the authors claim that "for every representative a state has on the House disaster relief oversight committee, it receives about $30 million in additional funding when a disaster is declared."

Critics point out that a top-heavy organization such as a large government agency cannot help but become bureaucratized, and that the problem is only compounded by giving it even more power, money, and authority. The Cato Institute's report observed, "Nonfederal relief suppliers — particularly those in the private sector — are able to overcome those problems." Authors Sobel and Leeson continued, referring to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina:

> Thus it should come as no surprise that the real success stories in the Katrina relief effort came from those who flouted the bureaucratic decision making process and took action without explicit

> approval by FEMA. The U.S. Coast Guard, for example, began its helicopter rescue efforts without waiting for any other government agency's approval or coordination.

Observers have noted that problems in coordination often center on the inability to get proper information to the right place at the right time. In a disaster, communications are often hampered considerably if not completely shut down. During the Bastrop County Complex fire, for instance, cellphone and Internet services were interrupted for approximately two days. As Sobel and Leeson accurately observed about disaster relief, "Coordination simply cannot be achieved by channeling demands through a centralized agency. Individuals with local knowledge and the ability to act on it must be allowed to make the decisions."

One of the victims of the Bastrop County fire, musician Byron Smith, who lost his home near Bastrop, was able to observe FEMA's bureaucracy firsthand. He noted that the local charities were much more helpful in meeting immediate needs than the government agency:

> It seemed to me that FEMA was all about paperwork, and I began to ask, "How does this help me?" I didn't get that kind of response from the charities. They were asking me what they could do for me, and we got immediate attention for our most immediate needs.

Part of FEMA's required paperwork was that each fire victim had to present his FEMA case number when seeking any donated items from the Smithville distribution center.

Several representatives of the federal program AmeriCorps also came to Smithville to work with FEMA. However, because they found that many suggestions they made for action were already in place, they decided to move to the nearby town of Bastrop and implement Smithville's organization there. But before they left, in what would seem a time-consuming and counterproductive effort, one AmeriCorps representative asked the leaders of Smithville's distribution efforts (those on the front lines of handing out donated items to victims) to have volunteers "write down every item that goes out the door" (an idea the volunteers quickly jettisoned).

Three weeks after the wildfire — while victims were still coming in to the Smithville distribution center for help, and over the protests of the local volunteers — the city shut down the center, at FEMA's suggestion, and the agency removed the enormous number of remaining items and stored them in a warehouse 70 miles away, awaiting the next disaster.

Though FEMA has improved its performance since Hurricane Katrina, the fact remains that by the time the federal officials arrived at the Bastrop County burn zone, volunteers had already had everything under control for more than a week.

FEMA is generally slow in responding to disasters — and not just because of bureaucratic ineptitude. According to Sobel and Leeson: "FEMA has an incentive to delay action even if more disaster victims are harmed by its not entering than would be harmed if it entered prematurely." How so? When FEMA errs on the side of caution, its mistake is not that visible. On the other hand, if FEMA were to immediately enter a disaster area — resulting, say, in rescue workers getting hurt — its mistake would be highly visible and would provoke widespread admonishment. A 2006 special report by the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs noted that "FEMA has a longstanding policy of not putting its emergency responders in the path of a storm so that they will not be in need of rescue themselves." This policy would naturally account for why FEMA takes so long to respond after a disaster.

The question then arises, why do communities line up for FEMA intervention? Many communities say

it's for the federal money.

Smithville's Fire Marshall Jack Page told *The New American* that the magnitude of the Bastrop County Complex fire prompted both Smithville and Bastrop to accept federal help in spite of its attendant problems. The towns were free to reject FEMA's help and continue their own efforts, but as Page explained, "The local municipalities would have suffered a real hardship without federal reimbursement. Since we are tax-based, it would take a long time to rebuild our community resources without it." Page noted, however, that as far as he knew, residents and county offices were still waiting for the reimbursement from FEMA for a 2009 fire in the area.

And Bastrop musician Byron Smith observed another flaw in the FEMA reimbursement system: rewarding irresponsible behavior:

> I've always been responsible and paid my bills on time, including my insurance premiums. I quickly learned that I was underinsured, but I had tried to do the right thing and be responsible. But, instead, because of that, I got at the back of the FEMA line behind many others who had never accepted the responsibility of carrying insurance.
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> I don't understand, nor do I think it is right, that the responsible people should be penalized for being responsible. FEMA's answer to me was that I could always seek an SBA loan for rebuilding, and if that failed, then I could come back for FEMA relief. Doesn't make any sense.

The New American was hard-pressed to discover a modern-day community affected by disaster that had not sought relief from FEMA. Critics have noted that most contemporary Americans have developed a habit of turning to the federal government for solutions to their problems, and they rarely question the constitutionality or morality of agencies such as FEMA.

Before FEMA

But what did communities do before there was a FEMA? On September 8, 1900, an unnamed hurricane slammed into Galveston, Texas. It was destined to become the deadliest natural disaster ever to strike the United States. The most-often reported number of deaths was 6,000 — more than died in Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. And although there was no federal agency such as FEMA, volunteers from cities around the state showed up with water, boats, and other forms of help. Aid of all sorts came in from across the nation as well, and financial donations arrived from around the world. The city raised its own money, and received state — but not national — funds to build the enormous seawall that protects Galveston to this day. In fact, the city so routinely experiences hurricane damage that it now keeps a large sum of money ($14 million, according to various sources) in reserve for recovery efforts.

And further back in time, Texas historians recall the severe drought that plagued the Lone Star State in the 1880s. The "Texas Seed Bill" was drafted by Congress to provide federal relief to suffering farmers, but President Grover Cleveland vetoed the legislation, pointing out that the U.S. Constitution does not authorize any such action. He explained,

> The friendliness and charity of our countrymen can always be relied upon to relieve their fellow citizens in misfortune. This has been repeatedly and quite lately demonstrated. Federal aid in such cases encourages the expectation of paternal care on the part of the government and weakens the sturdiness of our national character, while it prevents the indulgence among our people of that kindly sentiment and conduct which strengthens the bonds of a common brotherhood.

What happened next was remarkable. Private citizens donated 10 times more to the Texas farmers than the amount of federal aid legislated in the vetoed bill — proving the President's point.

It is believed by many in the burn zone of Bastrop County, Texas, that Americans are more than willing and able to help others recover from disasters, and would not be so willing to accept FEMA relief if they understood these implications. Citizen volunteers in Smithville managed to come together in an organized fashion and privately provide help to 4,270 people. And they can do it again.

Photo: AP Images