



# DEBRIS REMOVAL AFTER A MAJOR DISASTER

## *For Local Governments*

Removing debris left by a major disaster can be an expensive task for state and local governments. FEMA's Public Assistance Program provides funding for some debris removal after federally declared disasters. Compliance with the instructions laid out by FEMA in the Debris Monitoring Guide, along with the Public Assistance Program and Policy Guide gives state and local governments the best shot at being reimbursed for their debris removal efforts.

### WHAT IS ELIGIBLE

To be eligible, the debris must be generated from the federally declared disaster. The removal of the disaster generated debris must also be in the public interest. Removal of debris is in the public's interest based on its threat to public health and safety and when most of the community would benefit from its removal. Examples include removing debris from areas used by the entire community or removing debris from individual properties to prevent rodent infestations throughout the community.

Ineligible debris includes any debris listed in federally maintained navigable waterways, flood control structures, agricultural land, or natural unimproved land. FEMA will typically only cover removal of debris on commercial property if it is pre-approved, but approval may be granted when a large portion of the commercial sector of a community is impacted, and the debris removal is necessary to restore the community's economy.

### WHO IS ELIGIBLE

Only certain applicants qualify for the FEMA Public Assistance Program. Qualified applicants are state government agencies, local governments, special districts (school districts, irrigation districts, fire districts, utility districts, nonprofit organizations that provide critical governmental-type services), and federally recognized Native American Indian Tribes.

### DEBRIS MANAGEMENT PLAN

Immediately following the disaster, the applicant must formulate a debris management plan. The plan should identify a state-approved debris management site. The plan should identify a list of debris removal and monitoring contractors along with the "request for proposal" template used for their solicitation. Applicants must provide an initial estimate of debris listed by type along with pictures of the debris. The community should plan to have the debris clearance project completed within six months because this is the time limit set by FEMA.

### DOCUMENTATION

There are several forms that the local government must submit to be eligible for reimbursement. First, the local government must ensure that thorough documentation of all debris removal is recorded. Local governments must then make the request for reimbursement through their state government in accordance with that state's procedures.

A plethora of information including proof of responsibility, insurance policy, insurance settlements, an Insurance Commissioners Certification, maintenance records for public works systems, and photos of debris will need to be provided. Local governments also need



to include all necessary permits and loading tickets and logs that are created by debris monitors.

## DEBRIS MONITORS

Responsible debris monitoring is vital to ensuring that the community receives the maximum amount of reimbursement. Debris monitors should be appointed by the local government. Their task is to handle the contracts and permits required for debris removal. Debris monitors should be qualified and able to quantify debris loads accurately and objectively. They should also be familiar with operating large machinery. The monitors should document everything associated with debris removal.

There are a few different positions that fall under the debris monitor title. Loading Site Monitors verify that only eligible debris is collected, and they issue load tickets to contractors. Tower/Site Monitors measure truck capabilities, estimate load volumes, and record quantities of load tickets. Field Supervisors oversee the monitoring process and resolve issues.

## CATEGORIES OF DEBRIS

Debris should be separated into different categories. These categories should be communicated to residents of the community so they can separate their debris into piles ready for pickup in order to ensure that removal is quick and cost-efficient. Debris should be placed for pickup on the edge of residential properties near but not on the road. Only disaster-generated debris pickup is eligible for reimbursement. All debris collection must be thoroughly documented by type, and any recycle or salvage value should be documented. The different types of debris listed by FEMA are as follows.

*Vegetative debris* qualifies for reimbursement when it is on public property, blocking a public right of way, or its removal would benefit the public health and safety. This type of debris can typically be recycled or salvaged.

*Construction and demolition debris* consists of damaged components of buildings and its contents. This type of debris must present an immediate threat, or its removal must benefit the public health and safety of the community to be eligible for reimbursement.

*Hazardous waste* removal must comply with federal and state environmental requirements; this typically requires having a certified hazardous waste specialist leading the handling of this material. Activities pertaining to removal of hazardous wastes that are eligible for reimbursement include separation, special handling and disposing, control or stabilization, pumping water, and clean-up. Household hazardous waste should be treated the same way.

*Electronic waste* should be collected intact and stored for later processing. State electronic waste requirements must be complied with.

*White goods* are discarded household appliances such as refrigerators, washing machines, etc. This type of debris should be collected separately, cleaned, and processed to remove the materials inside.

*Soil, mud, and sand* removal can be reimbursed, but there must be documentation of what the conditions were before the disaster.

*Vehicles and vessels* will be qualified for removal funding if they present a hazard or immediate threat within a public area; they must be abandoned; the applicant must also verify the chain of custody of the vehicle or vessel.

*Putrescent debris* is debris that will decompose or rot. This includes all organic material such as spoiled produce and animal carcasses. This debris should be handled in compliance with

local safety requirements.

*Infectious waste* is waste that can transmit infections in humans such as medical waste. These materials should be handled in accordance with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. FEMA determines whether these materials are eligible for reimbursement on a case-by-case basis.

*Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear contaminated debris* is debris contaminated by these materials as a result of a natural or man-made disaster. The removal of these products should be performed in accordance with applicable statutes and regulations. Keep in mind that in a man-made disaster, some debris may be evidence of a crime scene; communicate with law-enforcement before removing these materials.

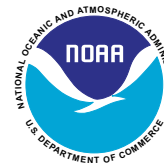
## FEMA'S DISCRETION

FEMA has the final say-so in determining whether to fund debris removal, based on their determination of whether the debris threatens public health and safety or is in the public's best interest. Following FEMA's debris removal guidelines gives the local government the opportunity for reimbursement. Therefore, it is necessary that the applicant complies with all the instructions given by FEMA to have the best chance of receiving repayment.

Even if eligible for reimbursement from FEMA, local governments will need to cover their share of the cost-share agreement associated with the disaster declaration. This is typically a 25%/75% split, though it may be modified in some instances. The local government is responsible for their portion of the cost-share associated with debris removal. FEMA only reimburses for a percentage of these costs.

This factsheet is focused on local governments. However, other qualified applicants include state government agencies, special districts (school districts, irrigation districts, fire districts, utility districts, nonprofit organizations that provide critical governmental-type services), and federally recognized Native American Indian Tribes.

LEARN  
ABOUT OUR  
RESOURCES  
HERE



## RESOURCES

Find your disaster declaration at FEMA's disaster declaration website: <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/declarations>

Find Louisiana's disaster response information at The State of Louisiana's Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness: <https://gohsep.la.gov>

Author: T. Toups, N. Pace, M. Daigle, C. Franze, and D. Seibert

All information current as of October 2024.