



NEWS



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Trump threatens to cut FEMA aid for California fires

Staff Writer, Inland News Today

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Camp Fire (The Mercury News)

WASHINGTON--President Donald Trump threatened to cut federal forest fire aid to California as the state recovers from the country's deadliest wildfire in a century.

"Billions of dollars are sent to the State of California for Forest fires that, with proper Forest Management, would never happen. Unless they get their act together, which is unlikely, I have ordered FEMA to send no more money. It is a disgraceful situation in lives & money!" Trump tweeted on Wednesday morning.

The White House did not initially respond when asked by The Wall Street Journal if the president had already instructed the Federal Emergency Management Agency to cut aid. White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders did not immediately respond to Newsweek's request for comment.

FEMA is part of the Department of Homeland Security, whose operations are affected by the partial government shutdown, which entered its 19th day on Wednesday.

Trump's tweet came a day after California Governor Gavin Newsom was sworn in. Newsom asked for \$105 million to improve wildfire safety on Tuesday. The state legislature has already set aside \$200 million for managing forests, according to The Sacramento Bee.

Newsom and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi criticized the president for his Wednesday tweet.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi responded that Trump's threat "insults the memory of scores of Americans who perished in wildfires last year & thousands more who lost their homes."

In November, the president blamed poor forest management for the wildfires that wreaked havoc across the state.

"There is no reason for these massive, deadly and costly forest fires in California except that forest management is so poor. Billions of dollars are given each year, with so many lives lost, all because of gross mismanagement of the forests. Remedy now, or no more Fed payments!" he tweeted during the Camp Fire, which killed 86 people, burned 153,000 acres of land and destroyed nearly 14,000 homes.

The tweet drew extensive backlash from firefighters, scientists and the public. Experts noted the role of climate change in worsening fires in California.

"California has always been a leader with respect to sound, science-based forest management practices on private land," J. Keith Gilles, a professor of forest economics at the University of California, Berkeley, told NBC News, saying Trump was "at best uninformed."

"Unfortunately, these practices don't have much influence on wind speed, temperature, relative humidity, or drought cycles, even if they may help us to address the long-term threat of climate change."

The president has also promoted thinning trees to decrease the severity of the wildfires. Experts have said this could help fires burn more slowly, but critics have noted that the federal government managed many of the state's forests and that Trump has sought to slash budgets of Department of Interior and U.S. Forest Service programs that are tasked with carrying out such activities. (Source: Newsweek)

<http://www.inlandnewstoday.com/story.php?s=53396>

Trump threatened to cut California wildfire aid. He may not have the authority to follow through.

Katie Mettler and Amy B. Wang, Washington Post

Posted: January 9, 2019, 4:39 pm

In the midst of a government shutdown, President Trump has threatened to cut off federal emergency aid to California for forest fires.

Trump tweeted Wednesday morning that "billions of dollars" are sent to California to help with its wildfire recovery efforts and claimed, without evidence, that the state would not need the funds if forests were properly managed.

"Unless they get their act together, which is unlikely, I have ordered FEMA to send no more money," Trump stated. "It is a disgraceful situation in lives & money!"

It is unclear, based on the tweet's wording, if Trump already directed the Federal Emergency Management Agency to withhold funds or if he would be doing so. FEMA representatives did not immediately respond to a request for comment Wednesday morning. An email sent to them generated this automated reply: "Due to the federal funding hiatus, we are not able to respond to general press queries."

The White House did not respond to a request for clarification on the intent of the president's tweet.

Whether the president even has the authority to rescind FEMA funding that has already been approved remains unclear. Guidelines for the way federal dollars flow after the president declares a national disaster, like he did after devastating wildfires in California this year, are outlined in the Stafford Act, said Rafael Lemaitre, the former director of public affairs for FEMA under the Obama administration.

"I'm not aware of any mechanism where you can say, 'I'm undeclaring a state of disaster,'" Lemaitre said.

After the Woolsey Fire in the south and the Camp Fire in the north this fall burned hundreds of thousands of acres of land, destroyed thousands of structures and killed 89 people, President Trump declared Ventura, Los Angeles and Butte counties disaster areas.

Since then, 6,646 individuals have applied for FEMA assistance to find temporary housing, and more than \$48.7 million in federal aid has already been approved, according to a data tracker on the FEMA website. It's unclear if these numbers have been updated during the government shutdown.

Individual assistance dollars help victims find temporary housing, pay for repairs to their homes or help them buy groceries, clothes or new furniture. The window to apply for this aid closes Jan. 31.

It is unknown if Trump's threat to stop FEMA funding could threaten those still seeking undistributed money.

"FEMA individual assistance is a real lifeline for people in their greatest time of need," Lemaitre said, "and to use the plight of survivors to push your political agenda is draconian."

Individual assistance differs from public assistance, which is money designated by FEMA to states to help fund infrastructure repairs related to the relevant disaster. That money trickles at a slower rate, Lemaitre said.

It's possible Trump could follow through on his threat by closing recovery centers in California or slowing the bureaucratic process by which public and individual assistance is transmitted to the state, Lemaitre said. Another possibility might be refusing funds for future phases of the recovery process that have not yet begun, said Alan Chvotkin, executive vice president and counsel with the Professional Services Council, a trade group that represents government contractors.

Chvotkin, too, said he doesn't believe the Stafford Act explicitly grants the president the authority to halt or take back funds already designated for FEMA aid. The Stafford Act does allow the federal government to recover payments made to a state if there is evidence of civil or criminal fraud.

The act also gives the president authority to help fund the cost of disaster preparation and prevention through what's called a hazard-mitigation grant. A president has the authority to withdraw approval for a hazard-mitigation grant if he determines the state has not implemented it in "a manner satisfactory to the president."

"Think about the impact this has on the disaster survivors in California," Lemaitre said. "These are survivors who right now, politics is the last thing on their mind. The last thing they need is more uncertainty in their lives as they try to survive."

California's Democratic lawmakers blasted Trump for his threat.

Newly sworn in Gov. Gavin Newsom told Trump they had "been put in office by the voters to get things done, not to play games with lives."

https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/01/09/trump-threatens-cut-off-fema-aid-california-forest-fires/?utm_term=.e6fafd7cf187