



KRISTI NOEM'S DISASTER REPORT CARD:

ONE YEAR OF FAILURE

*Underperformance in moments of crisis led to lives lost
& an unending cycle of disaster.*

Kristi Noem has had a year at the helm of FEMA. Disaster survivors who are facing her failings are calling for FEMA to be removed from her leadership and removed from the Department of Homeland Security to be an independent agency focused on aiding survivors. Disaster survivors deserve more, not less. We hope our struggles and focus on FEMA's failures make the system work better for families on the frontlines facing future disasters.

- **Kristi Noem became Secretary of Homeland Security on January 25, 2025, giving her direct control over FEMA.** Since 2003, FEMA has been housed within DHS, creating a structure that delays rescue and recovery and relief for our families and makes FEMA less accountable to our communities.
- **As DHS Secretary, Noem wields enormous power over FEMA:**
 - She appoints FEMA's leadership and shapes its management culture
 - She sets budget priorities and controls spending approvals
 - Under her authority, contracts and grants over \$100,000 require her personal sign-off

The results speak for themselves.



Texas Floods Response

Grade:

F

The Disaster:

In July 2025, severe flooding struck central Texas, claiming [137 lives](#). The disaster required immediate federal search and rescue support, aerial imagery, and surge capacity for survivor assistance.

Failures of Leadership:

- Noem's directive that she approve FEMA contracts or grants above \$100,000 effectively froze key spending decisions and delayed search-and-rescue deployments and imagery support by 72 hours. ([Kristi Noem Accused Of Making FEMA Changes That Failed Texans In The Floods](#), *Forbes*, July 10, 2025.)
- Due to call-center contracts lapsing under Noem's leadership, an estimated 70% of disaster assistance calls were unanswered in the days after the flooding, leaving many survivors unable to register for help or get basic guidance. ([FEMA Didn't Answer Thousands of Calls From Flood Survivors, Documents Show](#), *New York Times*, July 11, 2025.)
- The head of FEMA's Urban Search and Rescue branch resigned following the delayed response to the catastrophic flooding, citing the delay caused by bureaucratic hurdles put in place by the Department of Homeland Security. ([FEMA search and rescue chief resigns after frustration with Texas flood response](#), *CNN*, July 21, 2025.)

Struggles of Survivors:

- Survivors were left to search for their own dead, make sure their neighbors had the basics to stay alive in the immediate aftermath, and do the vast majority of the cleanup, repair, rebuilding with their own resources and those of volunteers - 137 people died and only 100 of the 2,924 Texans who applied for FEMA assistance to replace their destroyed homes received a replacement award. ([OpenFEMA Dataset: Individuals and Households Program](#))
- More than six months later many residents of Sandy Creek and Kerrville are still living in temporary housing while they navigate insurance paperwork. ([Residents, Travis County Officials Navigate Clean up Months After Floods](#). *Community Impact* (Austin/Leander), January 5, 2026.)
- Secretary Noem and Texas Governor Greg Abbott have attempted to rewrite the record, describing FEMA's response as "one of the fastest, most coordinated federal disaster responses in Texas history" - a lie that insults the memory of those lost in the floods. ([FEMA Moved Quickly to Help Texas. These States Are Still Waiting](#), *Washington Post*, July 22, 2025.)



St. Louis Tornado Reimbursements

Grade:

F

The Disaster:

St. Louis was struck by its first deadly tornado in decades, devastating neighborhoods and requiring immediate federal support.

Failures of Leadership:

- Once on the ground, FEMA workers were ordered to not participate in canvassing efforts to gather information from affected residents and inform them about available resources, meaning families without power or phone access had no one come to assist them; FEMA was also accused of "slow walking" the disaster declaration process, resulting in the declaration being made more than 3 weeks after the tornado hit. ("Hawley Says FEMA Is 'Slow-Walking' Disaster Declaration Requests." St. Louis Public Radio, June 6, 2025.)
- St. Louis was left without expected federal support. Mayor Cara Spencer said she was "gobsmacked" by the lack of FEMA engagement. Compared to the federal response after a 2011 Missouri tornado, St. Louis was left to do "the vast majority of the response" alone.
- The city's request to FEMA to cover the \$700 million cost of debris removal - estimated at one million tons - remained in limbo until four months after the storm hit. ("FEMA Is Paralyzed. Disaster-Torn Communities Are Paying the Price." Live Mint/Wall Street Journal, September 29, 2025.)

Struggles of Survivors:

- An estimated \$100 million in state-allocated tornado relief remains unspent, in part because the city is still trying to align those funds with FEMA rules and processes that are unclear. ("Missouri Gave St. Louis \$100M for Tornado Relief. The City Hasn't Spent Any of It." St. Louis Public Radio, January 15, 2026.)
- More than \$28 million dollars of eligible project costs have been submitted to FEMA for reimbursement with \$25 million having already worked through the FEMA audit process. The only thing keeping it from reaching St. Louis is Kristi Noem's signature. As of January 8, the city had only received \$107,000 of what they had applied for. (City of St. Louis, Missouri Budget and Public Employees Committee meeting, January 8, 2026.)
- Families and communities are still struggling to rebuild. Six months after the storm, large sections of a major American city looked like a "wasteland" according to journalistic reports. ("Tornado Survivors in St. Louis say recovery is a mess, due to FEMA changes," St. Louis Public Radio, November 16, 2025.)



Los Angeles Wildfires Recovery

Grade:

F

The Disaster:

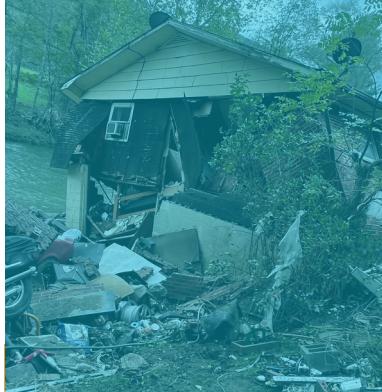
In January 2025, devastating wildfires swept through California, destroying thousands of homes. The fires were contained by early February, just one week after Noem took office—limiting her ability to interfere with immediate response but clearly impacting the ongoing response.

Failures of Leadership:

- After the fires burned for more than three weeks, it took seven months before clean-up efforts were complete. (“Fewer Than a Dozen Homes Have Been Rebuilt a Year After Being Burned Down in LA-Area Wildfires.” Associated Press, January 7, 2026.)
- Breaking with protocol, federal officials initially refused to fund soil testing, giving many families no other choice but to return home and live in houses that contained lead and heavy metals. (“Feds Won’t Test Soil After L.A. Wildfire Cleanup, Potentially Leaving Contamination Behind,” Los Angeles Times, May 4, 2025.)
- After a year, survivors of the Eaton Fire recently heard that FEMA would agree to pay for lead testing – at just 100 destroyed homes, leaving thousands still waiting for help. (“FEMA to Pay for Lead Testing at 100 Homes Destroyed in Eaton Fire, Report Says.” ABC7 Los Angeles, January 13, 2026.)

Struggles of Survivors:

- Fewer than a dozen homes have been rebuilt, out of the 13,000 destroyed. (“Fewer Than a Dozen Homes Have Been Rebuilt a Year After Being Burned Down in LA-Area Wildfires.” Associated Press, January 7, 2026.)
- Without wide-spread soil testing and remediation, families will rebuild on poisoned ground while children play in contaminated soil. (“When FEMA Failed to test soil for toxic substances after the L.A. fires, The Times had it done. The results were alarming” The Los Angeles Times. Published May 4, 2025.)



Long-term Community Rebuilding

Grade:

F

The Disaster:

Secretary Noem has shown she can move quickly when the request comes from a politically connected donor but doesn't treat our families and communities with the same urgency. While communities nationwide face dangerous delays, Noem **fast-tracked \$11 million** to rebuild a Naples pier within two weeks after her campaign donor requested help.

Failures of Leadership:

- In 2025, FEMA delayed close to \$11 billion in disaster reimbursements to 45 states, shifting payments to 2026 without indicating when the funds will be released. (“[FEMA Delays \\$11 Billion in State Disaster Reimbursements](#),” *National Association of Counties*, January 2026.)
- Flood Mitigation Assistance funding (\$600M) was halted. (“[FEMA Is Eliminating Hazard Mitigation Programs, Leaving Americans Nationwide at Risk as Disasters Worsen](#),” *Urban Institute*, February 2025.)
- BRIC program (\$4B+ in disaster mitigation funds) was terminated; funding reallocation blocked by court injunction. (“[Federal Judge Blocks Trump Administration from Reallocating More Than \\$4 Billion in Disaster Mitigation Funds](#),” *AP News*, August 5, 2025.)

Struggles of Survivors:

- Western North Carolina county governments who funded debris removal in the months immediately following the storm based on the promise that cost reimbursements would be provided by FEMA have been left in the lurch. Those reimbursements still have not arrived and county governments are now in debt, being forced to cut funding to essential programs, such as EMS and local hazard mitigation. (“[Western North Carolina Officials Blast FEMA for Funding Delays amid Helene Recovery](#),” *WBTV*, September 24, 2025.)
- The recent FEMA release of \$116 million to North Carolina does little to stack up against the estimated \$60 billion in total housing and recovery costs. Federal hurricane recovery funding in western North Carolina has, to date, amounted to 12% of projected cost compared to the 70+% provided for every other major hurricane recovery in recent history. (“[Total economic impact of Helene estimated at almost \\$60 billion in North Carolina](#),” *WBTV*, September 26, 2025.)
- More than 561 hazard mitigation applications remain stuck in FEMA review, leaving families in limbo. Homeowners are paying mortgages on houses they cannot live in, staring down bankruptcy and long-term displacement while decisions stall. These delays are not the result of congressional inaction; they stem from increasingly burdensome administrative reviews within FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security. Survivors like Heather, who lost everything during Hurricane Helene, submitted mitigation applications through the state months ago. The state forwarded them to FEMA. Nearly a year later, nothing has moved. (“[For Helene survivors, a stalled federal buyout program could spell financial trouble](#),” *Blue Ridge Public Radio*, December 12, 2025.)

OVERALL GRADE:

F

After one year as DHS Secretary, Kristi Noem has earned a failing grade across every measure of disaster response leadership.

THE REMEDY: AN INDEPENDENT FEMA

The solution is clear: FEMA must be restored as an independent, cabinet-level agency.

When FEMA was independent (1979-2003), it could respond without layers of political approval. The Administrator could deploy resources immediately, make decisions based on emergency needs and be directly accountable to our elected officials, survivors and state and local partners.

The current structure—with FEMA buried within DHS and subject to the Secretary's approval—has proven catastrophic under Noem's leadership.

An independent FEMA would:

- **Deploy resources immediately** because of being singularly focused on disaster response.
- **Maintain professional expertise** and allow first responders, emergency managers, and seasoned disaster response professionals to lead based on their years of experience.
- **Rebuild public trust** by demonstrating the federal government will be there when disaster strikes, no matter what, and engage with survivors and the officials who represent them on how to continue to improve the system so it serves our families and communities and prepares us for future disasters.

Secretary Noem has earned her failing grades. But the real failure is a system that allows one political appointee to obstruct disaster response for millions of Americans.