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New Solutions for Old Problems

“So, what is the timeline?” – this is often the first thought when local governments, communities, and individuals look at projects to increase their defense and mitigation portfolio against hazards. **The Hazard Mitigation Assistance (HMA) Program** often sees these mitigation projects face cumbersome barriers while needing to meet the **Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) Environmental and Historical Preservation (EHP) guidance.**



Florida recognized the need for a better process, given the number of hazards they faced and the amount of HMA projects they fund. FEMA, at the same time, faced similar issues with a backlog of Florida projects – creating the need for a mutual solution.

These backlogs and bottlenecks stemmed the creation of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between Florida’s Division of Emergency Management (FDEM) and FEMA. This type of MOA was not foreign to the state with the Florida Department of Transportation previously establishing a similar agreement with their federal partners for other backlogs and roadblocks. With roughly a thousand HMA projects since 2016, this MOA allowed for more state-level work on the front-end before sending along to FEMA for final say at the end of the process.

Getting into the specifics, Florida has state-level staff trained by FEMA Region IV in their EHP processes and guidance which allows state employees to do EHP guidance determinations and consultation letters. Once satisfactory those projects are sent to FEMA for final sign-off, speeding-up the project timeline significantly. To make this effective, FDEM increased their staffing level from two EHP specialists to eight specialists.

In operation since 2018, **FDEM sees this process as widely successful.** While this MOA achieved the intended goal of expediting the review processes for mitigation projects, also it also created a better understanding of local-level needs, concerns, and general knowledge that came with state employees understanding local circumstances. This allowed the state to better serve their sub-applicants and work with locals – providing greater transparency in a process. Another positive outcome of state-level EHP specialists are their involvement in the entire process, which ensures adherence to EHP guidance and due diligence from start to finish on mitigation projects.

While this solution has proven to expedite the review process, it also comes with some difficulties. Growing pains in the early years of the MOA included struggling to receive consistent training from FEMA and holding annual reviews for the MOA. Additionally, federal government shut downs caused delays and significant backlogs. As with everything in the FEMA guidance realm, Florida found issues with consistency across issued EHP guidance with state EHP specialists often operating off previous guidance due to a lack of updated guidelines. This leaves EHP specialists having to constantly anticipate changes which can lead to confusion and increased timelines.

Currently, **Florida is the only state that has this type of MOA with FEMA .** Florida is not the only state that faced burdensome delays on critical mitigation projects. This best practice is one that other hazard prone states, if not all, could strongly benefit from and would result in a greater system of resilience across the country.

**Well the wind is blowin' harder now
Fifty knots or thereabouts
There's white caps on the ocean
And I'm watchin' for water spouts
It's time to close the shutters
It's time to go inside**

— Jimmy Buffet, *Trying to Reason with Hurricane Season*

If you would like more information or have a state practice you'd like to highlight as part of this ongoing series, please contact [Jamie Logan](mailto:jlogan@nemaweb.org)

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