

NEMA 2026 Emergency Management Policy and Leadership Mid-Year Forum
March 10 – 14, 2026
Washington, DC

General Session Minutes

March 12, 2026

PRESENT *p = proxy

Region I

Connecticut
Maine
Massachusetts
New Hampshire
Rhode Island

Region II

New Jersey
New York
Puerto Rico
Virgin Islands

Region III

Delaware
District of Columbia
Maryland
Pennsylvania
Virginia
West Virginia

Region IV

Alabama
Florida
Georgia
Kentucky
North Carolina
South Carolina
Mississippi
Tennessee

Region V

Illinois
Indiana
Michigan
Minnesota
Ohio
Wisconsin

Region VI

Arkansas
Louisiana
New Mexico
Oklahoma

Region VII

Iowa
Kansas
Missouri
Nebraska

Region VIII

Colorado
Montana
North Dakota
South Dakota
Utah
Wyoming

Region IX

American Samoa
Arizona
California
Hawaii
Nevada

Region X

Alaska
Idaho
Oregon
Washington

President A.J. Gary called the meeting to order and asked Secretary Dawn Brantley to call the roll. A quorum was declared.

FEMA Review Council Update - Kevin Guthrie, Director, Florida Division of Emergency Management

Guthrie provided an overview of the FRC, established in January 2025 and described extensive listening sessions and stakeholder engagement nationwide. High-level themes: Reduce bureaucracy, improve coordination, ensure equitable access, strengthen pre-disaster mitigation, and address long-term challenges. Guthrie emphasized that change in emergency management is inevitable; state directors should engage procurement and contracting teams in planning. He highlighted the private sector as a key partner.

Thoughts and Reflections on FEMA Reform Efforts

The issue of FEMA reform continues to ring throughout the profession into 2026. The FEMA Review Council proposed legislation by the House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee, and countless recommendations from stakeholder partners made emergency management one of the year's top news headlines. This two-part panel offered a glimpse into recommendations from thought leaders and stakeholder partner input.

Moderator: John Benson, Director, Iowa Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management and NEMA Legislative Committee Chair

Panel 1: Christopher Currie, Government Accountability Office; Peter Muller, Pew Charitable Trust

Panel 2: Brett Mattson, National Association of Counties; Shelby Kerns, National Association of State Budget Officers; Renee Antoine, National Governors Association

Ken Graham, Director, National Weather Service

NWS Reorganization: As of March 11, 2026, the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate have approved an asymmetrical staffing reorganization of the NWS. NWS will transfer and embed staff in state Emergency Operations Centers based on staffing demand and disaster conditions. NWS has already embedded four meteorologists in California, Virginia, and Hawaii. The agency is planning to install eight more staff in Alaska, Arizona, Kentucky, Oregon, Wisconsin, Kansas, Utah, and Texas. An additional 50 individuals are expected to be placed in the next 60–90 days.

NWS will hire 300–400 meteorologists and hydrologists in the next few years. In response to a question about county-level partnerships with NWS, Director Ken Graham stated that this can be expanded with new tools, radar, and computers that use probabilities. Ken Graham noted that new technology can better explain scientific principles, warn communities, and improve the relationship between NWS and the population.

The agency is also obtaining a public safety designation and seeking legislation to make it long-term. Citing a study estimating that NWS radars will experience catastrophic failures by 2035, Director Ken Graham stated that NWS plans to replace over 160 radars by 2031.

Navigating Nation State Threats

General Thomas Carden, Vice Chief, National Guard Bureau

General Carden noted that the homeland is currently not a “sanctuary,” especially due to attacks since March 12, 2026. When there is an attack in the United States, they must decipher whether it just occurred in America or occurred as an attack on America. Many attacks can be terrorist-inspired, but it may not be a nation-state act or financed by a terrorist group.

The nation is under constant threat in all domains: Threats such as cyber and submarine aren’t seen. The key to security is to keep watch on threat vectors. Least defended threat vector is in the Arctic. The typical response begins with local leadership and local emergency management assessing what they can handle, then working up to the state and federal government. The National Guard and state Attorney Generals are collaborating on a strategic planning framework to assist in outlining these efforts.

Operations of the National Guard - Fully mobilizing the National Guard would require roughly 400,000 individuals being moved across the United States, which is not physically possible. There is a need to bridge the gap between homeland security and the defense domain. Critical infrastructure is important to protect, but it can be difficult if there is a line between domains.

Lessons Learned from Recent Disasters

Elizabeth Zimmerman, Senior Executive Advisor, IEM; Christina Curry, Acting Director, California Office of Emergency Services; Robert Ezelle, Director, Washington Emergency Management Division; Bryan Fisher, Director, Alaska Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management

Wildfires, floods, and a typhoon wreaked havoc on communities and residents in 2025. This session highlighted how states are navigating challenges and changing policies to ensure effective and resilient recoveries.

The panelists shared successes:

First, Ezelle noted that Washington saw successes in coordination amongst multiple governments. Second, Washington had a strong ability to get immediate help to communities to ensure their response was effective. However, this process should be institutionalized.

Curry acknowledged the speed of the response, but this comes with trade-offs. One process and requirement should be established for debris removal. Hazardous waste removal was carried out by the federal government far earlier than anticipated—within seven months of the disaster. Curry stated that states should know when they need help and request it. New Jersey provided overhead support in a joint field office. She emphasized rallying around major goals to support communities.

Fisher noted the successes of EMAC. Alaska Department of Transportation and unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) allowed the state to see damage and respond quickly. Fisher noted that without the UAS support a disaster declaration and individual assistance would not have been declared as quickly as it was. A caveat to the success of UAS was the need to deconflict data. Fisher noted that FEMA continues to listen to communities, despite a poor history of federally built homes for Alaska native people. Arctic construction technique experts assisted with reconstruction.

Money Matters: Utilizing AI to Make Quantitative Investment and Mitigation Decisions

Kim Gajewski, Homeland Security Policy Manager, Google; Chris Hein, Field CTO and Technical Director, Google; David Orr, Chief Digital Officer, AES Corporation; Terence (Terry) O’Leary, Acting Commissioner, New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services

Facing ever-tightening financial constraints, states must make the most informed resourcing decisions possible to get the highest return on their investments. From prioritizing proactive infrastructure maintenance to making impactful post-disaster mitigation decisions, AI-powered tools can help decision-makers quantify- and justify- the impact their dollars have across the emergency management lifecycle.

AI can integrate overhead imagery to create a prognosis of environmental conditions. Google systems have used existing data to support infrastructure assessments in New Mexico and fire satellites in the Western U.S. Google and the Maui government used AI to create automated, multilingual call centers during the 2023 Hawai’i wildfires. The centers were running within 72 hours. AI can analyze cyber threats and alert humans when necessary. Hein noted that Google is increasing their investment in AI-driven cybersecurity. AI can be used to research, understand, and draft grant applications. Hein noted that humans should remain in the grant application generation cycle. Multi-agent systems, in which one system builds the application, and another looks for errors, reduces the time and effort required to submit grants.

New York is using AI for counterterrorism investigations, particularly in the New York Police Department’s Lower Manhattan Security Initiative. New York DHSES has employed Notebook LM to streamline executive decision making. The platform analyzed exit interviews from over 16 years to create a mind map displaying why employees may choose to stay at or leave the agency. AI also analyzes DHSES’s biennial employee satisfaction survey.

Partner Spotlight: American Red Cross

Brad Kieserman, Vice President, Operations and Logistics; American Red Cross

Three Requests to Emergency Management Directors

1. Invite the Red Cross into planning processes. Planning together improves operational coordination during disasters. Directors were encouraged to become familiar with their regional Red Cross disaster executive.
2. Include the Red Cross in EOCs early and often. Early integration improves situational awareness and coordination.
3. Help build volunteer capacity.

Kieserman noted that immediate mass care support cannot simply be purchased. It must be developed through trained volunteers and community partnerships. A question was asked about how the Red Cross is expanding its volunteer workforce. The organization is working to streamline training requirements so volunteers remain engaged and are not discouraged by lengthy onboarding processes.

Partner Spotlight: National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster

Rev. Dr. David Guadalupe EJ, Board Chair & Interim President & CEO National VOAD

National VOAD is a network of 56 nonprofit organizations that coordinate disaster response and recovery efforts across the United States. National VOAD has partnered with the Bill Anderson Fund to incorporate research into disaster response planning. The partnership focuses on qualitative research with tribal nations to improve collaboration and support culturally appropriate recovery strategies. VOAD recently received a \$1.8 million grant from Verizon to support disaster coordination initiatives. National VOAD is developing a mapping platform for Long-Term Recovery Groups (LTRGs) using technology from ESRI, in partnership with Texas A&M University. The project aims to improve coordination and visibility of recovery organizations operating in disaster-affected areas.

VOAD is launching the National Training and Development Institute to expand training opportunities for nonprofit disaster responders. The institute will: Expand disaster training capacity; offer free courses for member organizations; provide paid certification programs; and focus on building community resilience and recovery leadership.

March 14, 2026

NEMA Business Session

Secretary’s Report – Dawn Brantley

A motion was made to approve the minutes from the 2025 Annual Forum.

Moved: AK DISPOSITION: Passed Unanimously
Second: MD

Treasurer’s Report – Robert Ezelle

FY26 Year-to-Date Financial Report – The budget called for spending down the fund balance by \$142,485. As of January 31, NEMA had revenue over expense in the amount of \$1,135,769. The revenue represents receipt of the majority of membership dues for the year. The 2025 Annual Forum was a revenue producer for NEMA. The meeting generated approximately \$400,000 in revenue. Portions of that money are being used to shore up gaps in the budget created by the loss of FEMA grant funding and address equipment and technology needs. With regard to expenses, we are within the budget at this point in the fiscal year. As of January 31st, NEMA has \$3.39M in the fund balance. Ezelle reported on NEMA’s long-term investment with Baird Trust. The current market value of NEMA’s portfolio with Baird is \$2,061,187. For FY26 to date, NEMA has a little over \$5M in cash and assets with CSG and Baird. Finally, NEMA is currently undergoing its annual third-party audit. The audit results will be shared with the Board of Directors and will be available to any NEMA State Director upon request.

Board of Directors’ Budget Decisions -

The NEMA Finance Subcommittee brought forward two recommendations to the Board of Directors for their consideration at the beginning of the forum.

- FY27 membership dues - NEMA’s membership dues policy states that the organization has the ability to increase dues annually based on the consumer price index.
 - The Finance Subcommittee considered a CPI increase of 2.7% for FY27, which begins on July 1, 2026.

- The subcommittee took into account the fact that NEMA has a healthy fund balance of cash plus our investments with Baird, so we are on a solid financial footing at this time. Also, we recognize the current financial challenges being faced by states, as well as all of our members.
 - Therefore, the subcommittee recommended that NEMA pause a dues increase for FY27. The next increase would occur in FY28. The Board of Directors approved the recommendation. Membership dues will remain at the same level in FY27.
- Establishment of a NEMA Charitable Foundation – Ezelle reminded the membership that NEMA has had grant funding from FEMA since the early 2000s to support the National Homeland Security Consortium. The grant was cancelled by DOGE and FEMA in 2025. While brainstorming ways to fund the Consortium, the establishment of a foundation to accept philanthropic and public donations was suggested. We took that idea and expanded it to create a foundation that could support the consortium but serve much broader purposes as well, like special projects to advance emergency management, support research and emerging issue areas, support leadership development, and promote public education. Those are just a few examples.
 - A concept proposal was presented to the Board, and it was approved. In 2026, NEMA will establish a charitable, public foundation under NEMA’s existing 501(c)3 tax designation and organizational structure.
 - More detailed information will be provided as the initiative progresses.

Voting on Committee Reports – Erica Bornemann, Private Sector Committee Chair

A motion was made to endorse the committee paper.

Moved: VA DISPOSITION: Passed Unanimously
 Second: TN

There being no further business, a motion was made to adjourn the 2026 Mid-Year Forum.

Moved: TN DISPOSITION: Passed Unanimously
 Second: IA