

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin Emergency Management assists with disaster recovery in New Mexico

Posted on Wednesday, Aug 31, 2022

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MADISON, Wis. – After wildfires and flooding resulted in widespread damage across New Mexico earlier this year, state and local resources moved quickly to assess the devastation and begin the recovery process. This monumental effort requires the work of many people and a great deal of time, prompting New Mexico to look outside of its borders for help.

Under the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), the New Mexico Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management put out a nationwide call for experienced emergency managers to come to the state and help with the recovery process. Members of Wisconsin Emergency Management (WEM) answered that call, deploying to New Mexico for almost four weeks to offer their expertise and experience to help counties impacted by these disasters.

EMAC is an agreement that allows states to request and share resources easily following a disaster. New Mexico is reimbursing Wisconsin for expenses related to the deployment, including salaries.

“Not only was it an opportunity to help another state and county, but it was also a chance to see and learn what other parts of the country go through,” said WEM State Public Assistance Officer Eric Learn. “After suffering an extraordinary wildfire event followed immediately by their annual monsoon season, New Mexico had not only a federally declared disaster for fire damages but also for flooding.”

Learn, who has worked on the recovery efforts for several disasters in Wisconsin, was assigned to San Miguel County. He helped the county navigate the FEMA Public

Assistance process, met with FEMA representatives, conducted damage site inspections, and helped develop projects to get reimbursed for their response and recovery efforts. The FEMA Public Assistance program provides funding for repairing public infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, in areas that have been granted a presidential disaster declaration.

WEM Public Assistance Specialist Patty Fahey spent her time in Mora County, where she served as an emergency management liaison assisting with response and recovery efforts. This involved helping the county start the FEMA Public Assistance recovery process and working on resource request coordination through New Mexico's State Emergency Operations Center.

"The deployment was challenging and rewarding," Fahey said. "I learned a lot and worked with a great group of people. Communities are recovering from wildfires, while simultaneously responding to nearly daily flash floods that will extend through monsoon season this fall."

Fahey said that presents challenges, because the rainfall that would normally be absorbed by soil and vegetation is running off and carrying ash and debris with it downhill and downstream from burned areas. In Mora County, on multiple occasions the road crew repaired a road in the morning only to have it wash away again in the afternoon.

"I worked with an incredible team, including county and state employees, FEMA, National Guard, the New Mexico Department of Transportation, and Emergency Management Assistance Compact personnel from varying emergency management backgrounds across the country," Fahey said.

Both Learn and Fahey have returned to their regular duties in Madison, but say they appreciate having gone to New Mexico to assist under the EMAC request. If given the opportunity to do a similar deployment again in the future though, both say they are ready.

"I would absolutely do another EMAC deployment," Fahey said. "I learned a lot and gained valuable experiences."

"I would definitely do another EMAC deployment in the future," Learn added. "I thought it was a great experience. We were able to help another state and get exposure to different types of disasters we don't get here in Wisconsin."