



At a Glance

Why We Did This Review

We evaluated whether the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) Office of Land and Emergency Management (OLEM) has worked with appropriate federal agencies and verified states have planned for disaster debris management.

The EPA published *Planning for Natural Disaster Debris* guidance in 2008 in response to a U.S. Government Accountability Office report recommendation. The document was developed to provide detailed guidance to state and local entities involved with managing debris disposal after a disaster, to better ensure protection of public health and the environment, and to prevent the creation of future Superfund sites.

This report addresses the following EPA goals or cross-agency strategies:

- Addressing climate change and improving air quality.
- Cleaning up communities and advancing sustainable development.
- Ensuring the safety of chemicals and preventing pollution.

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EPA Has Developed Guidance for Disaster Debris but Has Limited Knowledge of State Preparedness

What We Found

The EPA has worked with other federal agencies in response to natural disasters. However, according to EPA staff, the agency has limited information on the types of, volumes of and disposal sites for disaster debris that is not hazardous waste.

Disaster debris can contain an unsegregated mixture of hazardous and solid waste debris that may ultimately fall under EPA regulatory authority. By obtaining information on the types of, volumes of and disposal sites for disaster debris, the EPA is positioned to communicate and help guide the management of potential risks to humans and the environment.

OLEM has not determined that states have planned for disaster debris management consistent with EPA guidance. Based on interviews with all 10 EPA regional offices, we found that, except for Regions 4 and 5, EPA regions are unaware of the status or content of state disaster debris plans, and do not know whether the plans address the components defined in the EPA's 2008 guidance.

According to the EPA, states are not federally required to develop debris management plans, and the EPA has no authority to ensure that states have adequate plans or that they follow their plans during a disaster response. However, without determining the adequacy of state plans, the EPA cannot assess states' readiness to manage disaster debris, and scenarios where disaster debris is not managed or disposed of in an environmentally sound manner could result. The EPA's effectiveness in helping communities to become more resilient to the effects of climate change and extreme weather events could be impacted, which is also an element of the agency's climate change adaptation plans.

EPA Regions 4 and 5 have examples of good practices for disaster debris management. Region 4 established a team to provide disaster debris assistance to states. Region 5 developed a disaster debris website that includes links to state plans and guidance within the region.

Recommendations and Planned Agency Corrective Actions

We recommended that OLEM establish procedures for EPA regions to obtain available information for the types, volumes and disposal sites for disaster debris in future disasters. We also recommended that OLEM develop a plan to provide assistance to states to address the major elements identified in EPA guidance. The EPA agreed with all recommendations and provided planned corrective actions and completion dates. All recommendations are resolved.

Debris from natural disasters has contributed to contamination of at least one Superfund site, which has cost the EPA an estimated \$55 million. The EPA can reduce the risk of future unsafe debris disposal practices by improving its understanding and awareness of the quality and completeness of state disaster debris management plans.