

GAO

Testimony Before the Chairman,
Committee on Banking, Housing and
Urban Affairs, U.S. Senate

For Release on Delivery
Expected at 10:00 a.m. EDT
Tuesday, October 18, 2005

FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

Challenges Facing the National Flood Insurance Program

Statement of William O. Jenkins, Jr., Director, Homeland
Security and Justice Issues





Highlights of [GAO-06-174T](#), a testimony before the Chairman, Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The disastrous hurricanes that have struck the Gulf Coast and Eastern seaboard in recent years—including Katrina, Rita, Ivan, and Isabel—have focused attention on federal flood management efforts. The National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), established in 1968, provides property owners with some insurance coverage for flood damage. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) within the Department of Homeland Security is responsible for managing the NFIP.

This testimony offers information from past GAO work on (1) the financial structure of the NFIP; (2) why the NFIP insures properties for repetitive flood losses and the impact on NFIP resources; and (3) compliance with requirements for mandatory purchase of NFIP policies. The testimony also discusses recommendations from a report GAO is issuing today on FEMA's oversight and management of the NFIP.

What GAO Recommends

In the report released today, GAO is recommending, among other things, that FEMA and its partners use a statistically valid approach to sample NFIP insurance claim files for quality assurance purposes, and that DHS and FEMA develop and document plans for implementing requirements of the Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2004, which reauthorized the NFIP. FEMA disagreed with those recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-174T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact William O. Jenkins, Jr., at (202) 512-8777 or jenkinswo@gao.gov.

FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

Challenges Facing the National Flood Insurance Program

What GAO Found

As GAO has reported, the NFIP, by design, is not actuarially sound. The program does not collect sufficient premium income to build reserves to meet long-term future expected flood losses, in part because Congress authorized subsidized insurance rates to be made available for some properties. FEMA has generally been successful in keeping the NFIP on a sound financial footing, but the catastrophic flooding events of 2004 (involving four separate hurricanes) required FEMA, as of August 2005, to borrow \$300 million from the U.S. Treasury to help pay an estimated \$1.8 billion on flood insurance claims. Following Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, legislation was enacted to increase FEMA's borrowing authority from \$1.5 billion to \$3.4 billion through fiscal year 2008.

Properties that suffer repeated flooding but generally pay subsidized flood insurance rates—so-called repetitive-loss properties—constitute a significant drain on NFIP resources. These properties account for roughly 1 percent of properties insured under the NFIP, but account for 25 percent to 30 percent of all claim losses. The Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2004 established a pilot program requiring owners of repetitive-loss properties to elevate, relocate, or demolish houses, with NFIP bearing some of those costs. Future studies of the NFIP should analyze the progress made to reduce the inventory of subsidized repetitive-loss properties, and determine whether additional regulatory or congressional action is needed.

In 1973 and again in 1994, legislation was enacted requiring the mandatory purchase of NFIP policies by some property owners in high-risk areas. In June 2002, GAO reported that the extent to which lenders required to do so enforced mandatory purchase requirements was unknown. While FEMA officials believed that many lenders often were noncompliant, neither side could substantiate its claims regarding compliance.

FEMA did not use a statistically valid method for sampling files to be reviewed in its monitoring and oversight activities. As a result, FEMA cannot project the results of these reviews to determine the overall accuracy of claims settled for specific flood events or assess the overall performance of insurance companies and their adjusters in fulfilling responsibilities for the NFIP—actions necessary for FEMA to have reasonable assurance that program objectives are being achieved.

FEMA has not yet fully implemented provisions of the Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2004 requiring the agency to develop new materials to explain coverage and the claims process to policyholders when they purchase and renew policies, establish an appeals process for claimants, and provide insurance agent education and training requirements. The statutory deadline for implementing these changes was December 30, 2004, and as of September 2005 FEMA had not developed documented plans with milestones for meeting the provisions of the act.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's hearing on the future of the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) to discuss issues related to the future financial stability of the NFIP and recommendations we have made for improvements to the management and oversight of the program. The NFIP combines property insurance for flood victims, mapping to identify the boundaries of the areas at highest risk of flooding, and incentives for communities to adopt and enforce floodplain management regulations and building standards to reduce future flood damage. The effective integration of all three of these elements is needed for the NFIP to achieve its goals of:

- providing property flood insurance coverage for a high proportion of property owners who would benefit from such coverage;
- through this insurance coverage reducing taxpayer-funded disaster assistance when flooding strikes, and
- reducing flood damage through flood plain management and the enforcement of building standards (such as elevating structures).

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is responsible for the oversight and management of the program.¹ Under the program, the federal government assumes the liability for the insurance coverage and sets rates and coverage limitations, among other responsibilities.

Floods are the most common and destructive natural disaster in the United States. According to NFIP statistics, 90 percent of all natural disasters in the United States involve flooding. However, flooding is generally excluded from homeowner policies that typically cover damage from other losses, such as wind, fire, and theft. Because of the catastrophic nature of flooding and the inability to adequately predict

¹In March 2003, FEMA and its approximately 2,500 staff became part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Most of FEMA—including its Mitigation Division, which is responsible for administering the NFIP—is now part of the department's Emergency Preparedness and Response Directorate. However, FEMA retained its name and individual identity within the department. Under a reorganization plan proposed by the current Secretary of DHS, the Emergency Preparedness and Response Directorate would be abolished, and FEMA would report directly to the Undersecretary and Secretary of DHS.

flood risks, private insurance companies have largely been unwilling to underwrite and bear the risk of flood insurance.

Congress established the NFIP pursuant to the National Flood Insurance Act of 1968² to provide policyholders with some insurance coverage for flood damage, as an alternative to disaster assistance, and to try to reduce the escalating costs of repairing flood damage. In creating the NFIP, Congress found that a flood insurance program with “large-scale participation of the Federal Government and carried out to the maximum extent practicable by the private insurance industry is feasible and can be initiated.”³ In keeping with this purpose, FEMA has contractual agreements with 95 private insurance company partners to sell policies and adjust and process claims.

As of August 2005, the NFIP was estimated to have approximately 4.6 million policyholders in about 20,000 communities. Since its inception, the program has paid about \$14.6 billion in insurance claims, primarily from policyholder premiums that otherwise would have been paid through taxpayer-funded disaster relief or borne by home and business owners themselves. According to FEMA, every \$3 in flood insurance claims payments saves about \$1 in disaster assistance payments, and the combination of flood plain management and mitigation efforts save about \$1 billion in flood damage each year.

The unprecedented damage wrought by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are also likely to result in unprecedented claims on the NFIP. GAO is beginning a body of work on the preparation for, response to, and recovery from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. As GAO moves forward with this work, we will continue to work with this and other congressional committees and the accountability community—federal inspector generals, state and city auditors—regarding the scope of our future work on emergency management issues, including the NFIP. Our goal is to apply our resources and expertise to address long-term concerns, such as those we are discussing today, and to avoid duplicating the work of others. Currently, we have teams in the Gulf Coast states collecting data and observations from hurricane victims and federal, state, local, and private

²The National Flood Insurance Act of 1968, as amended, is codified at 42 U.S.C. 4001 to 4129.

³42 U.S.C. 4001(b)(2).

participants in the preparation for, response to, and recovery from these devastating hurricanes, including the flooding they caused.

Past experience can provide context for considering future policy options. In this spirit, my testimony today is based on a body of work that GAO has done over the past several years before the nation began the struggle to respond to the devastating effects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in our Gulf Coast states. This prior work has addressed the issues of the program's structure and financing, repetitive loss properties, mandatory and voluntary purchase of flood insurance, and revising and improving the nation's flood maps. Together they provide information useful in assessing efforts over the NFIP's history to enhance the program's financial stability and effectiveness. Today, we are also releasing a report on FEMA's management and oversight of the flood insurance program that includes several recommendations for improvement.⁴ This report was mandated by the Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2004.⁵ It includes recommendations

on two pre-Hurricane Katrina flood-insurance related issues that pose a challenge for FEMA. These are (1) improving FEMA's management and oversight of the NFIP and (2) FEMA's implementation of provisions of the Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2004 to provide policyholders a flood insurance claims handbook that meets statutory requirements, to establish a regulatory appeals process, and to ensure that flood insurance agents meet minimum NFIP education and training requirements.

The report we are releasing today is based on interviews with FEMA officials, documentation of its monitoring and oversight processes, and our field observations of FEMA's monitoring and oversight activities. In addition, we analyzed the National Flood Insurance Act of 1968, as amended, its legislative history, and FEMA's implementing regulations, and we examined documentation and interviewed officials about FEMA's efforts to comply with provisions of the 2004 Flood Insurance Reform Act. We did our work from December 2004 to August 2005 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

⁴GAO, *Federal Emergency Management Agency: Improvements Needed to Enhance Oversight and Management of the National Flood Insurance Program*, [GAO-06-119](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 18, 2005).

⁵Bunning-Bereuter-Blumenauer Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-264, 118 Stat. 712, 727 (2004).

Major Program Issues—A Summary

A key characteristic of the NFIP is the extent to which FEMA must rely on others to achieve the program's goals. FEMA's role is principally one of establishing policies and standards that others generally implement on a day-to-day basis and providing financial and management oversight of those who carry out those day-to-day responsibilities. These responsibilities include ensuring that property owners who are required to purchase flood insurance do so, enforcing flood plain management and building regulations, selling and servicing flood insurance policies, and updating and maintaining the nation's flood maps. In our prior work, we have identified several major challenges facing the NFIP:

- **Reducing losses to the program resulting from policy subsidies and repetitive loss properties.**⁶ The program is not actuarially sound because of the number of policies in force that are subsidized—about 29 percent at the time of our 2003 report. As a result of these subsidies, some policyholders pay premiums that represent about 35-40 percent of the true risk premium. Moreover, at the time of our 2004 report, there were about 49,000 repetitive loss properties—those with two or more losses of \$1,000 or more in a 10-year period—representing about 1 percent of the 4.4 million buildings insured under the program. From 1978 until March 2004, these repetitive loss properties represented about \$4.6 billion in claims payments.
- **Increasing property owner participation in the program.** As little as half of eligible properties may participate in the flood insurance program. Moreover, the extent of noncompliance with the mandatory purchase requirement by affected property owners is unknown.
- **Developing accurate, digital flood maps.**⁷ In our report on the NFIP's flood map modernization program, we discussed the multiple uses and benefits of accurate, digitized flood plain maps. However, the NFIP faces a major challenge in working with its contractor and state and local partners of varying technical capabilities and resources to produce accurate, digital flood maps. In developing those maps, we recommended that FEMA develop and implement data standards that will enable FEMA, its

⁶ GAO, *Flood Insurance: Challenges Facing the National Flood Insurance Program*, [GAO-03-606T](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 1, 2003); *National Flood Insurance Program: Actions to Address Repetitive Loss Properties*, [GAO-04-401T](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 25, 2004).

⁷ GAO, *Flood Map Modernization: Program Strategy Shows Promise, but Challenges Remain*, [GAO-04-417](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 31, 2004).

contractor, and its state and local partners to identify and use consistent data collection and analysis method for developing maps for communities with similar flood risk.

- **Providing effective oversight of flood insurance operations.** In the report we are releasing today, we note that FEMA faces a challenge in providing effective oversight of the 95 insurance companies and thousands of insurance agents and claims adjusters who are primarily responsible for the day-to-day process of selling and servicing flood insurance policies.

The NFIP Pays Expenses and Claims with Premiums, but Its Financial Structure Is Not Designed to be Actuarially Sound

To the extent possible, the NFIP is designed to pay operating expenses and flood insurance claims with premiums collected on flood insurance policies rather than with tax dollars. However, as we have reported, the program, by design, is not actuarially sound because Congress authorized subsidized insurance rates to be made available for policies covering some properties to encourage communities to join the program. As a result, the program does not collect sufficient premium income to build reserves to meet the long-term future expected flood losses.⁸ FEMA has statutory authority to borrow funds from the Treasury to keep the NFIP solvent.⁹

Until the 2004 hurricane season, FEMA had been generally successful in keeping the NFIP on sound financial footing. It had exercised its authority to borrow from the Treasury three times in the last decade when losses were heavy and repaid all funds with interest. As of August 2005, the program had borrowed \$300 million to cover an estimated \$1.8 billion in claims from the major disasters of 2004, including hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan, and Jean, which hit Florida and other East and Gulf Coast states. The large number of claims arising from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita will require FEMA to borrow heavily from the Treasury, because the NFIP does not have the financial reserves necessary to offset heavy losses in the short-term. Following Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, legislation was enacted that increased FEMA's borrowing authority from \$1.5 billion to \$3.5 billion through fiscal year 2008.¹⁰ Additional borrowing authority may be needed to pay claims arising from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

⁸GAO, *Flood Insurance: Information on the Financial Condition of the National Flood Insurance Program*, [GAO-01-992T](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 2001).

⁹See 42 U.S.C. 4016.

¹⁰The National Flood Insurance Program Enhanced Borrowing Authority Act of 2005, Pub. L. No. 109-65 (Sept. 20, 2005).

Premium Subsidies and Repetitive-Loss Properties Affect NFIP's Actuarial Soundness

In reauthorizing the NFIP in 2004, Congress noted that “repetitive-loss properties”—those that had resulted in two or more flood insurance claims payments of \$1,000 or more over 10 years—constituted a significant drain on the resources of the NFIP.¹¹ These repetitive loss properties are problematic not only because of their vulnerability to flooding but also because of the costs of repeatedly repairing flood damages. While these properties make up only about 1 percent of the properties insured under the NFIP, they account for 25 to 30 percent of all claims losses. At the time of our March 2004 report on repetitive loss properties, nearly half of all nationwide repetitive loss property insurance payments had been made in Louisiana, Texas, and Florida. According to a recent Congressional Research Service report, as of December 31, 2004, FEMA had identified 11,706 “severe repetitive loss” properties defined as those with four or more claims or two or three losses that exceeded the insured value of the property.¹² Of these 11,706 properties almost half (49 percent) were in three states—3,208 (27 percent) in Louisiana, 1,573 (13 percent) in Texas, and 1,034 (9 percent) in New Jersey.

As the destruction caused by horrendous 2004 and 2005 hurricanes are a driving force for improving the NFIP today, devastating natural disasters in the 1960s were a primary reason for the national interest in creating a federal flood insurance program. In 1963 and 1964, Hurricane Betsy and other hurricanes caused extensive damage in the South, and, in 1965, heavy flooding occurred on the upper Mississippi River. In studying insurance alternatives to disaster assistance for people suffering property losses in floods, a flood insurance feasibility study found that premium rates in certain flood-prone areas could be extremely high. As a result, the National Flood Insurance Act of 1968, which created the NFIP, mandated that existing buildings in flood-risk areas would receive subsidies on premiums because these structures were built before the flood risk was known and identified on flood insurance rate maps.¹³ Owners of structures built in flood-prone areas on or after the effective date of the first flood insurance rate maps in their areas or after December 31, 1974, would have to pay full actuarial rates.¹⁴ Because many repetitive loss properties were

¹¹Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-264, section 2(3),(4), (5), 118 Stat. 712, 713 (2004).

¹²Congressional Research Service, *Federal Flood Insurance: The Repetitive Loss Problem*, RL32972 (Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2005).

¹³42 U.S.C. 4014(a)(2), 4015(a), (b).

¹⁴42 U.S.C. 4014(a)(1), 4015(c)

built before either December 31, 1974 or the effective date of the first flood insurance rate maps in their areas, they were eligible for subsidized premium rates under provisions of the National Flood Insurance Act of 1968.

The provision of subsidized premiums encouraged communities to participate in the NFIP by adopting and agreeing to enforce state and community floodplain management regulations to reduce future flood damage. In April 2005, FEMA estimated that floodplain management regulations enforced by communities participating in the NFIP have prevented over \$1.1 billion annually in flood damage. However, some of the properties that had received the initial rate subsidy are still in existence and subject to repetitive flood losses, thus placing a financial strain on the NFIP.

For over a decade, FEMA has pursued a variety of strategies to reduce the number of repetitive loss properties in the NFIP. In a 2004 testimony, we noted that congressional proposals have been made to phase out coverage or begin charging full and actuarially based rates for repetitive loss property owners who refuse to accept FEMA's offer to purchase or mitigate the effect of floods on these buildings.¹⁵ The 2004 Flood Insurance Reform Act created a 5-year pilot program to deal with repetitive-loss properties in the NFIP. In particular, the act authorized FEMA to provide financial assistance to participating states and communities to carry out mitigation activities or to purchase "severe repetitive loss properties."¹⁶ During the pilot program, policyholders who refuse a mitigation or purchase offer that meets program requirements will be required to pay increased premium rates. In particular, the premium rates for these policyholders would increase by 150% following their refusal and another 150% following future claims of more than \$1,500.¹⁷ However, the rates charged cannot exceed the applicable actuarial rate.

¹⁵GAO, *National Flood Insurance Program: Actions to Address Repetitive Loss Properties*, [GAO-04-401T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 25, 2004).

¹⁶Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-264, section 102(b), (c), 118 Stat. 712, 714 (2004). The act defines a "severe repetitive loss property" to mean single-family properties that have received at least \$20,000 in flood insurance payments based on 4 or more claims of at least \$5,000 each. The act requires FEMA to define in future regulation which multi-family properties constitute "severe repetitive loss properties."

¹⁷*Id.*, section 102(h)(1), (2), (3).

It will be important in future studies of the NFIP to continue to analyze data on progress being made to reduce the inventory of subsidized NFIP repetitive loss properties, how the reduction of this inventory contributes to the financial stability of the program, and whether additional FEMA regulatory steps or congressional actions could contribute to the financial solvency of the NFIP, while meeting commitments made by the authorizing legislation.

Data Inconclusive on Compliance with Requirements for Mandatory Purchase of NFIP Policies

In 1973 and 1994, Congress enacted requirements for mandatory purchase of NFIP policies by some property owners in high risk areas. From 1968 until the adoption of the Flood Disaster Protection Act of 1973, the purchase of flood insurance was voluntary. However, because voluntary participation in the NFIP was low and many flood victims did not have insurance to repair damages from floods in the early 1970s, the 1973 act required the mandatory purchase of flood insurance to cover some structures in special flood hazard areas of communities participating in the program. Homeowners with mortgages issued by federally-regulated lenders on property in communities identified to be in special flood hazard areas are required to purchase flood insurance on their dwellings for the amount of their outstanding mortgage balance, up to a maximum of \$250,000 in coverage for single family homes. The owners of properties with no mortgages or properties with mortgages held by lenders who are not federally regulated were not, and still are not, required to buy flood insurance, even if the properties are in special flood hazard areas—the areas NFIP flood maps identify as having the highest risk of flooding.

FEMA determines flood risk and actuarial ratings on properties through flood insurance rate mapping and other considerations including the elevation of the lowest floor of the building, the type of building, the number of floors, and whether or not the building has a basement, among other factors. FEMA flood maps designate areas for risk of flooding by zones. For example, areas subject to damage by waves and storm surge are in zone with the highest expectation for flood loss.

Between 1973 and 1994, many policyholders continued to find it easy to drop policies, even if the policies were required by lenders. Federal agency lenders and regulators did not appear to strongly enforce the mandatory

flood insurance purchase requirements.¹⁸ According to a recent Congressional Research Service study,¹⁹ the Midwest flood of 1993 highlighted this problem and reinforced the idea that reforms were needed to compel lender compliance with the requirements of the 1973 Act. In response, Congress passed the National Flood Insurance Reform Act of 1994. Under the 1994 law, if the property owner failed to get the required coverage, lenders were required to purchase flood insurance on their behalf and then bill the property owners. Lenders became subject to civil monetary penalties for not enforcing the mandatory purchase requirement.

In June 2002, we reported that the extent to which lenders were enforcing the mandatory purchase requirement was unknown. Officials involved with the flood insurance program developed contrasting viewpoints about whether lenders were complying with the flood insurance purchase requirements primarily because the officials used differing types of data to reach their conclusions. Federal bank regulators and lenders based their belief that lenders were generally complying with the NFIP's purchase requirements on regulators' examinations and reviews conducted to monitor and verify lender compliance. In contrast, FEMA officials believed that many lenders frequently were not complying with the requirements, which was an opinion based largely on noncompliance estimates computed from data on mortgages, flood zones, and insurance policies; limited studies on compliance; and anecdotal evidence indicating that insurance was not always in place where required. Neither side, however, was able to substantiate its differing claims with statistically sound data that provide a nationwide perspective on lender compliance.²⁰

¹⁸The federal entities for lending regulation are the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, the Office of Thrift Supervision, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, the National Credit Union Administration, and the Farm Credit Administration.

¹⁹Congressional Research Service, *Federal Flood Insurance: The Repetitive Loss Problem* (June 30, 2005).

²⁰GAO, *Flood Insurance: Extent of Noncompliance with Purchase Requirements is Unknown*, [GAO-02-396](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 21, 2002).

Accurate, Updated Flood Maps Are The Foundation of the NFIP

Accurate flood maps that identify the areas at greatest risk of flooding are the foundation of the NFIP. Flood maps must be periodically updated to assess and map changes in the boundaries of floodplains that result from community growth, development, erosion, and other factors that affect the boundaries of areas at risk of flooding. FEMA has embarked on a multi-year effort to update the nation's flood maps at a cost in excess of \$1 billion. The maps are principally used by (1) the approximately 20,000 communities participating in the NFIP to adopt and enforce the program's minimum building standards for new construction within the maps' identified flood plains; (2) FEMA to develop accurate flood insurance policy rates based on flood risk, and (3) federal regulated mortgage lenders to identify those property owners who are statutorily required to purchase federal flood insurance. Under the NFIP, property owners whose properties are within the designated "100-year floodplain" and have a mortgage from a federally regulated financial institution are required to purchase flood insurance in an amount equal to their outstanding mortgage balance (up to the statutory ceiling of \$250,000).

FEMA expects that by producing more accurate and accessible digital flood maps, the NFIP and the nation will benefit in three ways. First, communities can use more accurate digital maps to reduce flood risk within floodplains by more effectively regulating development through zoning and building standard. Second, accurate digital maps available on the Internet will facilitate the identification of property owners who are statutorily required to obtain or who would be best served by obtaining flood insurance. Third, accurate and precise data will help national, state, and local officials to accurately locate infrastructure and transportation systems (e.g., power plants, sewage plants, railroads, bridges, and ports) to help mitigate and manage risk for multiple hazards, both natural and man-made.

Success in updating the nation's flood maps requires clear standards for map development; the coordinated efforts and shared resources of federal, state, and local governments; and the involvement of key stakeholders who will be expected to use the maps. In developing the new data system to update flood maps across the nation, FEMA's intent is to develop and incorporate flood risk data that are of a level of specificity and accuracy commensurate with communities' relative flood risks. Not every community may need the same level of specificity and detail in its new flood maps. However, it is important that FEMA establish standards for the appropriate data and level of analysis required to develop maps for all communities of a similar risk level. In its November 2004 Multi-Year Flood Hazard Identification Plan, FEMA discussed the varying types of data

collection and analysis techniques the agency plans to use to develop flood hazard data in order to relate the level of study and level of risk for each of 3,146 counties.

FEMA has developed targets for resource contribution (in-kind as well as dollars) by its state and local partners in updating the nation's flood maps. At the same time, it has developed plans for reaching out to and including the input of communities and key stakeholders in the development of the new maps. These expanded outreach efforts reflect FEMA's understanding that it is dependent upon others to achieve the benefits of map modernization.

Monitoring and Oversight of NFIP Identifies Specific Problems, but Does Not Provide Comprehensive Information on Overall Program Performance

To meet its monitoring and oversight responsibilities, FEMA is to conduct periodic operational reviews of the 95 private insurance companies that participate in the NFIP. In addition, FEMA's program contractor is to check the accuracy of claims settlements by doing quality assurance reinspections of a sample of claims adjustments for every flood event. For operational reviews, FEMA examiners are to do a thorough review of the companies' NFIP underwriting and claims settlement processes and internal controls, including checking a sample of claims and underwriting files to determine, for example, whether a violation of policy has occurred, an incorrect payment has been made, and if files contain all required documentation. Separately, FEMA's program contractor is responsible for conducting quality assurance reinspections of a sample of claims adjustments for specific flood events in order to identify, for example, whether an insurer allowed an uncovered expense, or missed a covered expense in the original adjustment.

The operational reviews and follow-up visits to insurance companies that we analyzed during 2005 followed FEMA's internal control procedures for identifying and resolving specific problems that may occur in individual insurance companies' processes for selling and renewing NFIP policies and adjusting claims. According to information provided by FEMA, the number of operational reviews completed between 2000 and August 2005 were done at a pace that allows for a review of each participating insurance company at least once every 3 years, as FEMA procedures require. In addition, the processes FEMA had in place for operational reviews and quality assurance reinspections of claims adjustments met our internal control standard for monitoring federal programs.

However, the process FEMA used to select a sample of claims files for operational reviews and the process its program contractor used to select

a sample of adjustments for reinspections were not randomly chosen or statistically representative of all claims. We found that the selection processes used were, instead, based upon judgmental criteria including, among other items, the size and location of loss and complexity of claims. As a result of limitations in the sampling processes, FEMA cannot project the results of these monitoring and oversight activities to determine the overall accuracy of claims settled for specific flood events or assess the overall performance of insurance companies and their adjusters in fulfilling their responsibilities for the NFIP—actions necessary for FEMA to meet our internal control standard that it have reasonable assurance that program objectives are being achieved and that its operations are effective and efficient.

To strengthen and improve FEMA’s monitoring and oversight of the NFIP, we are recommending in today’s report that FEMA use a methodologically valid approach for sampling files selected for operational reviews and quality assurance claims reinspections.

FEMA Has Not Fully Implemented NFIP Program Changes Mandated by the Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2004

As of September 2005, FEMA had not yet fully implemented provisions of the Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2004. Among other things, the act requires FEMA to provide policyholders a flood insurance claims handbook; to establish a regulatory appeals process for claimants; and to establish minimum education and training requirements for insurance agents who sell NFIP policies.²¹ The 6-month statutory deadline for implementing these changes was December 30, 2004.

In September 2005, FEMA posted a flood insurance claims handbook on its Web site. The handbook contains information on anticipating, filing and appealing a claim through an informal appeals process, which FEMA intends to use pending the establishment of a regulatory appeals process. However, because the handbook does not contain information regarding the appeals process that FEMA is statutorily required to establish through regulation, it does not yet meet statutory requirements. With respect to this appeals process, FEMA has not stated how long rulemaking might take to establish the process by regulation, or how the process might work, such as filing requirements, time frames for considering appeals, and the composition of an appeals board. Therefore, it remains unclear how or when FEMA will establish the statutorily required appeals process.

²¹Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-264, sections 204, 205, and 207.

With respect to minimum training and education requirements for insurance agents who sell NFIP policies, FEMA published a Federal Register notice on September 1, 2005, which included an outline of training course materials. In the notice, FEMA stated that, rather than establish separate and perhaps duplicative requirements from those that may already be in place in the states, it had chosen to work with the states to implement the NFIP requirements through already established state licensing schemes for insurance agents. The notice did not specify how or when states were to begin implementing the NFIP training and education requirements. Thus, it is too early to tell the extent to which insurance agents will meet FEMA's minimum standards. FEMA officials said that, because changes to the program could have broad reaching and significant effects on policyholders and private-sector stakeholders upon whom FEMA relies to implement the program, the agency is taking a measured approach to addressing the changes mandated by Congress. Nonetheless, without plans with milestones for completing its efforts to address the provisions of the act, FEMA cannot hold responsible officials accountable or ensure that statutorily required improvements are in place to assist victims of future flood events.

We are recommending in today's report that FEMA developed documented plans with milestones for implementing requirements of the Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2004 to provide policyholders a flood insurance claims handbook that meets statutory requirements, to establish a regulatory appeals process, and to ensure that flood insurance agents meet minimum NFIP education and training requirements.

FEMA did not agree with our recommendations. It noted that its current sampling methodology of selecting a sample based on knowledge of the population to be sampled was more appropriate for identifying problems than the statistically random probability sample we recommended. Although FEMA's current nonprobability sampling strategy may provide an opportunity to focus on particular areas of risk, it does not provide management with the information needed to assess the overall performance of private insurance companies and adjusters participating in the program—information that FEMA needs to have reasonable assurance that program objectives are being achieved.

FEMA also disagreed with our characterization of the extent to which FEMA has met provisions of the Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2004. We believe that our description of those efforts and our recommendations with regard to implementing the Act's provisions are valid. For example, although FEMA commented that it was offering claimants an informal

appeals process in its flood insurance claims handbook, it must establish regulations for this process, and those are not yet complete.

Concluding Observations

The most immediate challenge for the NFIP is processing the flood insurance claims resulting from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Already, according to FEMA, the NFIP has received about twice as many claims in 2005 as it did in all of 2004, which was itself a record year. The need for effective communication and consistent and appropriate application of policy provisions will be particularly important in working with anxious policyholders, many of whom have been displaced from their homes.

In the longer term, Congress and the NFIP face a complex challenge in assessing potential changes to the program that would improve its financial stability, increase participation in the program by property owners in areas at risk of flooding, reduce the number of repetitive loss properties in the program, and maintain current and accurate flood plain maps. These issues are complex, interrelated, and are likely to involve trade-offs. For example, increasing premiums to better reflect risk may reduce voluntary participation in the program or encourage those who are required to purchase flood insurance to limit their coverage to the minimum required amount (i.e., the amount of their outstanding mortgage balance). This in turn can increase taxpayer exposure for disaster assistance resulting from flooding. There is no “silver bullet” for improving the current structure and operations of the NFIP. It will require sound data and analysis and the cooperation and participation of many stakeholders.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you and the Committee Members may have.

GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

Contact points for our Office of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. For further information about this testimony, please contact Norman Rabkin at (202) 512-8777 or at rabkinn@gao.gov, or William O. Jenkins, Jr. at (202) 512-8757 or at jenkinswo@gao.gov. This statement was prepared under the direction of Christopher Keisling. Key contributors were Amy Bernstein, Christine Davis, Deborah Knorr, Denise McCabe, and Margaret Vo.

This is a work of the U.S. government and is not subject to copyright protection in the United States. It may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without further permission from GAO. However, because this work may contain copyrighted images or other material, permission from the copyright holder may be necessary if you wish to reproduce this material separately.

GAO's Mission

The Government Accountability Office, the audit, evaluation and investigative arm of Congress, exists to support Congress in meeting its constitutional responsibilities and to help improve the performance and accountability of the federal government for the American people. GAO examines the use of public funds; evaluates federal programs and policies; and provides analyses, recommendations, and other assistance to help Congress make informed oversight, policy, and funding decisions. GAO's commitment to good government is reflected in its core values of accountability, integrity, and reliability.

Obtaining Copies of GAO Reports and Testimony

The fastest and easiest way to obtain copies of GAO documents at no cost is through GAO's Web site (www.gao.gov). Each weekday, GAO posts newly released reports, testimony, and correspondence on its Web site. To have GAO e-mail you a list of newly posted products every afternoon, go to www.gao.gov and select "Subscribe to Updates."

Order by Mail or Phone

The first copy of each printed report is free. Additional copies are \$2 each. A check or money order should be made out to the Superintendent of Documents. GAO also accepts VISA and Mastercard. Orders for 100 or more copies mailed to a single address are discounted 25 percent. Orders should be sent to:

U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street NW, Room LM
Washington, D.C. 20548

To order by Phone: Voice: (202) 512-6000
TDD: (202) 512-2537
Fax: (202) 512-6061

To Report Fraud, Waste, and Abuse in Federal Programs

Contact:

Web site: www.gao.gov/fraudnet/fraudnet.htm

E-mail: fraudnet@gao.gov

Automated answering system: (800) 424-5454 or (202) 512-7470

Congressional Relations

Gloria Jarmon, Managing Director, JarmonG@gao.gov (202) 512-4400
U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7125
Washington, D.C. 20548

Public Affairs

Paul Anderson, Managing Director, AndersonP1@gao.gov (202) 512-4800
U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7149
Washington, D.C. 20548