

What is ESF #4?

Wildland fire agencies respond to more types of emergencies than only wildland fire, and structural fire departments respond to more than only structure fires. In addition to day-to-day emergencies of all types within their areas of protection, these emergency responders also deal with hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, terrorist attacks—any type of natural or human-caused disaster or emergency could result in a request to the Federal government for wildland or structural fire resources.

Coordination of resources can be complicated during a Presidential declaration of emergency or major disaster; however, a process exists to guide such multiagency interactions. In these cases, the response is coordinated under the National Response Framework (NRF). The NRF identifies the roles and structures of Federal agencies to provide support to States or other agencies through Emergency Support Functions (ESFs). The NRF identifies ESF #4 as the coordinator for wildland, rural, urban, and suburban firefighting support; and under the NRF, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) serves as Primary Agency for ESF #4. During all types of disasters and major emergencies, ESF #4 is the primary link between the Federal wildland and structural fire communities and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)/Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The USFS coordinates and staffs ESF #4 with the support of the Department of the Interior (DOI), and serves as the face of wildland and structural firefighting resources to FEMA and other involved agencies.

There are six departments or agencies identified as support agencies to ESF #4 to provide technical support, assistance, and expertise in specific areas related to firefighting operations. In addition to DOI, these support agencies are the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA), the National Weather Service, Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Defense, and Department of State. Their roles related to ESF #4 are identified in the ESF #4 Annex of the NRF.

Emergency Support Function #4

The purpose of ESF #4 is to provide Federal support for the detection and suppression of wildland, rural, and urban fires resulting from, or occurring coincidentally with, an all hazard incident requiring a coordinated Federal response and assistance. Under the NRF, ESF #4 manages and coordinates Federal firefighting activities by mobilizing firefighting resources in support of State, tribal, and local wildland, rural, and urban firefighting agencies. In addition, these resources are often mobilized to support Federal or State entities with situations that do not involve wildland fire.

USFS Washington Office Fire & Aviation Management, All Hazard & International Fire Support Branch is the day-to-day link to DHS/FEMA and provides the National ESF #4 coordinator. Each USFS region/area has a designated Regional/Area ESF coordinator to work with their FEMA region(s). As support agencies, DOI Office of Wildland Fire and USFA each have an ESF #4 coordinator to maintain a close working relationship with the National ESF #4 coordinator.

During a disaster or emergency, ESF #4 may be staffed at all levels of FEMA operations:

- The National Response Coordination Center (NRCC) at FEMA headquarters in Washington, DC;
- A Regional Response Coordination Center (RRCC) in any of the 10 FEMA regions;
- A FEMA Incident Management Assistance Team (IMAT) – an advance team that deploys at the onset of an emergency to provide Federal liaison capabilities with the affected State(s) and set up a Joint Field Office (JFO), if necessary.
- A JFO established in any State affected by a disaster or major emergency;
- A State Emergency Operations Center (EOC); or
- A Geographic Area Coordination Center (GACC);
- The National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC).

The ESF #4 positions at FEMA facilities are referred to as “Fire Unit Leader” and “Fire Specialist.”

ESF #4 Position Qualifications

ESF #4 is staffed by qualified personnel from USFS, DOI, and the USFA. The ESF #4 Primary Leader (ESFL) is always an USFS employee as the agency is the Executive Agent to FEMA for firefighting support under the Stafford Act and the National Response Framework. The Fire Unit Leader at a FEMA facility will always be a qualified ESFL. USFS and DOI employees can be qualified as ESF #4 Support–Wildland (ESFW); USFA employees can be qualified as ESF #4 Support–Structure (ESFS) to provide expertise on structural and urban firefighting. Employees of any of the agencies may be qualified as ESF #4–Administrative Support (ESFA). ESFWs, ESFSs, and ESFAs working at FEMA facilities are Fire Specialists.

Qualifications for all of the ESF #4 positions involve both training and successful demonstration of performance documented through completion of a position task book. The official qualifications are identified in the Federal Wildland Fire Qualifications Supplement to the National Wildfire Coordinating Group PMS 310-1, Wildland Fire Qualification System Guide.

When activated, ESF #4 staff at the NRCC serve as the link between USFS and DOI leadership and FEMA leadership. Similarly, ESF #4 staff at the RRCC or JFO serves as the link between USFS and DOI regions or State offices and FEMA regions. In addition to being the conduit linking the resource ordering process to FEMA funding mechanisms, ESF #4 staff gathers ongoing intelligence for the ESF #4 agencies and FEMA about emerging details regarding the incident.

Tactical and Logistical Support

ESF #4 is the link between the wildland fire resource ordering process and FEMA funding mechanisms during a disaster response. Upon request for firefighting resource support from a State, FEMA provides ESF #4 with a mission assignment. ESF #4 places the order with the appropriate Geographic Area Coordination Center (GACC). As with wildland fires, the GACC mobilizes and coordinates firefighting resources at the geographic area level.

In addition to the primary ESF #4 mission, USFS and DOI are also identified as support agencies to other ESFs. These agencies may be sub-tasked by any of these ESFs to provide support identified in the NRF. For example, under these support missions, USFS may be asked to provide:

- Saw-capable personnel for emergency road clearing;
- Command and control assets (single resource or IMTs);
- Transportation assets, such as aircraft;
- Radio communications systems and support personnel;
- Engineering and contracting/procurement personnel and equipment to assist in emergency removal of debris;
- Resources and supplies for evacuation shelters;
- Staff for establishing logistics facilities such as incident support bases or Federal staging areas;
- Personnel, equipment, and supplies to support Federal health and medical teams;
- Cache equipment and supplies to support Federal urban search and rescue task forces;
- Technical assistance and logistical support at oil and hazardous materials spills; and
- Law enforcement and investigation personnel.

Additionally, FEMA can issue a direct mission assignment (MA) to USFS or DOI through ESF #4 to provide support outside of that specifically identified in the NRF. Any requests for assistance outside of the primary or support missions identified in the NRF are closely scrutinized by ESF #4 staff. When possible, we provide advisory services, guidance, and training to the requesting agency to help them build capacity rather than performing the task for them.

ESF #4 activations do not always result in mobilization of response assets such as IMTs or crews. In fact, the majority of activations require USFS to staff the ESF #4 desk at an RRCC with one or two people for a few days – nothing more. However, there are incidents – Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma in 2005, the California fire sieges in 2007 and 2008, Hurricane Irene in 2011, Superstorm Sandy in 2012, the Colorado Floods in 2013, and Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria in 2017 – where dozens of ESF #4 staff and hundreds of responders are mobilized.

Examples of Notable ESF #4 Assignments

2009

North Dakota Tornado – On the evening of July 8, an EF 3 tornado with winds up to 150 mph touched down in the southern part of Dickinson, ND. Several hundred homes, apartments and businesses were damaged, power lines and telephone lines were knocked out, and massive debris was hindering response efforts. As an extension of the disaster already in place in North Dakota for support to flooding along the Red River, FEMA issued a Mission Assignment to ESF #4 in accordance with our NRF support mission to provide emergency road clearing. Forest Service personnel created emergency travel lanes through the debris and cut down hazard trees to make it safe for local emergency responders to conduct response operations.

Hurricanes Anna and Bill – These back-to-back hurricanes threatened U.S. Territories in the Caribbean and Atlantic Basins. An ESF #4 Primary Leader (ESFL) accompanied a FEMA Incident Management Assistance Team to Puerto Rico prior to the storms. The role of the ESFL was to identify potential support that could be provided through ESF #4.

American Samoa Tsunami and Typhoon Melor – Following a major earthquake, a tsunami seriously impacted American Samoa. An ESFL and ESF #4 Wildland Support staff member accompanied a FEMA Incident Management Assistance Team to American Samoa to identify potential support that could be provided through ESF #4. During that response, Typhoon Melor was poised to strike Saipan and Guam. An incident management team was mobilized to assist FEMA in providing life-saving and life-sustaining supplies to the islands; however, the storm's last-minute change of course spared the islands from significant impacts.

2010

Arizona Winter Storms – A series of major winter storms swept through Arizona in January creating heavy snow accumulations in the northeast part of the state which blocked access routes to and from some areas left many people stranded or without the means to provide the basic necessities of life. Following a FEMA emergency declaration on January 24th, Forest Service equipment and personnel worked in coordination with the Arizona State Type 2 incident management team in supplying food, water, charcoal, and fuel wood to residents most affected in the aftermath of this weather event. Forest Service equipment including dozers and snowmobiles were used to clear roads and ferry supplies to residents in areas that were inaccessible.

Hurricane Earl – This major hurricane formed in late August and threatened the entire East Coast of the United States for several days into early September. Forest Service staffed the ESF #4 desk in two FEMA regions and maintained close contact with FEMA in two other regions throughout the event. The Forest Service also provided both ESF #4 and aviation coordination personnel for FEMA Headquarters. In New England, the Forest Service mobilized an incident management team and two saw crews to provide emergency road clearing to enable local emergency responders perform search and rescue if necessary.

Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill – The Forest Service coordinated closely with the Department of Agriculture and provided support to the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and other entities during the response to this Spill of National Significance. While this incident fell under the National Contingency Plan (rather than the NRF) and was technically not an ESF #4 incident, the Forest Service coordinated it in the same way and provided over 100 employees over the course of the incident to support the response in the functional areas of biology, archeology, finance, purchasing, supply, helicopter operations, dispatch, and resource management.

2011

Tsunami from Japan Earthquake – The catastrophic earthquake in Japan in March triggered a tsunami that threatened the entire West Coast of the U.S. from Alaska to California. FEMA activated ESF #4 nationally and in two FEMA regions because of the potential damage from the tsunami. Ultimately, damage from the tsunami was not widespread in the U.S. and no Federal firefighting resources were needed.

Northern Rockies/Rocky Mountain Flooding – Flooding and mudslides caused by spring rains and warm temperatures melting an excessive snow pack occurred throughout the Northern Rocky Mountains in May. FEMA activated ESF #4 regionally, and the Forest Service provided ESF #4 staff and an incident management team to coordinate State and local response to flooding in Wyoming.

Hurricane Irene – This Category 3 storm in late August made landfall in Puerto Rico, then made landfall three times on the U.S. East Coast -- at Cape Lookout, North Carolina; Little Egg Inlet, New Jersey; and New York City. Coastal areas in the Mid-Atlantic States sustained the brunt of the damage from the initial landfall; Irene then battered much of the Northeast with record rainfall and major flooding. ESF #4 staff operated nationally and in four FEMA regions. Three incident management teams and 11 hand crews were mobilized to New York and Massachusetts following Hurricane Irene to assist with emergency road clearing and coordination of distribution of water and other commodities. Communications equipment, communications technicians, and aviation specialists were also mobilized to assist FEMA in two FEMA regions.

Flooding from Tropical Storm Lee – In September, Tropical Storm Lee made landfall at Pecan Island, Louisiana, then stalled over Pennsylvania and New York adding a tremendous amount of rain to areas already saturated by rains from Hurricane Irene. Record flooding occurred in many areas. ESF #4 staff, along with one incident management team and two hand crews were again assigned to New York State to support operations there and in Pennsylvania.

Texas Wildfires – Extreme drought resulted in a critical fire situation throughout much of Texas. In September, several serious wildfires consumed over 1,000 homes. A Presidential Declaration of Emergency was issued, and FEMA activated ESF #4 to provide technical support and advice to FEMA personnel working with the State of Texas. Firefighting resources continued to be coordinated through the national wildland fire mobilization system, funded primarily through Fire Management Assistance Grants rather than mission assignments.

2012

Colorado Wildfires – Extreme drought and below-average snowpack resulted in extreme wildfire conditions throughout the Rocky Mountains and Great Basin regions in 2012. In Colorado, the High Park Fire near Boulder and the Waldo Canyon Fire in Colorado Springs resulted in the loss of hundreds of homes and the evacuation of tens of thousands of residents. In late June, USFS and USFA were tasked by the FEMA to provide a liaison to the FEMA National Watch Center to help provide situational awareness and information related to these and other wildfires affecting the Western United States. The President declared a major disaster for the areas affected by the High Park and Waldo Canyon Fires.

Hurricane Sandy – Hurricane Sandy was the second-largest Atlantic storm on record, affecting the East Coast from Florida to Maine, and states as far west as Indiana. Making landfall as a post-tropical cyclone in southern New Jersey on October 29, Sandy battered the densely populated New York and New Jersey region with heavy rains, strong winds, and record storm surges. On the western side of the storm, blizzard conditions paralyzed parts of the central Appalachians, including much of West Virginia. The storm's effects were extensive, resulting in a massive Federal response. ESF #4 coordinated the mobilization of 10 IMTs, 50 hand crews, and various other resources. At the height of the response, 1,200 responders were deployed to New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and West Virginia. In addition, qualified ESF #4 and support personnel were working with FEMA at JFOs, RRCCs, State EOCs, and the NRCC, and in support of the operations at the Northeastern Area State & Private Forestry offices, the Eastern Area Coordination Center, and the USFS Washington Office.

2013

Presidential Inauguration – ESF #4 was activated in support of this National Special Security Event because of the potential for a major emergency due to the number of people expected in Washington, DC and the surrounding communities. ESF #4 was prepared to coordinate firefighting resources in support of FEMA or other ESFs as well as DC, Maryland, and Virginia should it have been necessary.

North Dakota Floods – Spring flooding occurred along the Red River Basin in North Dakota and Minnesota for the third out of the previous four years. The Forest Service provided FEMA and North Dakota with communications equipment and personnel to assist with the “flood fight” and subsequent evacuations.

Colorado Flash Floods – In September 2013, a significant rain event resulted in serious flash flooding in the Colorado Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. Following an Emergency Declaration by the President, FEMA issued a Mission Assignment through ESF #4 for command/control/coordination and aviation support for all-hazard emergency operations in the areas affected by the floods. During the two week response, ESF #4 had ordered two IMTs, 11 hand crews, seven helicopters and modules, five air tactical platforms, and associated overhead personnel (approximately 490 individuals total). These resources provided support for missions that had a significant impact on the outcome of the incident: rescue of approximately 1500 people and over 700 animals, and hauling of 114,800 lbs. of cargo to remote areas and stranded communities.

2014

Oso Slide – A major landslide occurred near the town of Oso, Washington, in March. Mud and debris cover a 1.3 square mile span, at a depth of 60 feet in places; 43 people were killed by the slide. The search effort continued for more than a month. FEMA activated ESF #4 regionally, and the Forest Service provided ESF #4 staff and a Type 2 incident management team to coordinate response operations, which involved over 200 responders at the height of the response.

Washington Wildfires – Extreme drought continued to result in a critical fire situation throughout much of the Pacific Northwest. In July, a Presidential Declaration of Emergency was declared, and FEMA activated ESF #4 to provide enhanced situational awareness on the wildfire situation in Washington, and to provide coordination with the incident management teams operating at the fires. FEMA and the State were particularly concerned about flooding/debris flows in and near the burned areas from some major storm systems. The Forest Service was issued a Mission Assignment from FEMA for a Burned Area Rehabilitation Team (BAER) to provide technical assistance and training in post-fire assessment techniques and modeling for a team of State and local resources.

2017

Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria – Three major hurricanes made landfall in three different parts of the country (Texas/Louisiana, Florida/Georgia, and Puerto Rico/U.S. Virgin Islands) within weeks of each other, all while the National Preparedness Level was at the highest P.L. 5. ESF #4 coordinated the ordering for FEMA from across all Federal and State organizations 27 interagency Incident Management Teams, seven 20-person crews, 26 two-person saw modules, and miscellaneous overhead personnel between August 26 and November 19. Missions included managing Federal staging areas, providing logistical support to law enforcement personnel, performing emergency road clearing, managing logistics facilities, and supporting local emergency operations centers.

Acronyms

As with any administrative function, FEMA has its own shorthand that all ESFs must learn and use. The following are acronyms that speed communication—once you've learned them.

DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOI	Department of the Interior
EOC	(State) Emergency Operations Center
ESF	Emergency Support Function
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
GACC	Geographic Area Coordination Center
IMAT	Incident Management Assistance Team
JFO	Joint Field Office
MA	Mission Assignment
NICC	National Interagency Coordination Center
NRCC	National Response Coordination Center
NRF	National Response Framework
RRCC	Regional Response Coordination Center
USFA	U.S. Fire Administration
USFS	U.S. Forest Service