

OFFICE OF U.S. FOREIGN DISASTER ASSISTANCE (USAID/OFDA)

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, SAN JOSÉ, COSTA RICA

A Decade in Review: Storm and Flood Response

Since 2005, USAID/OFDA has responded to 65 disasters related to the effects of hurricanes, tropical storms, floods, and other severe weather in Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean.

For USAID/OFDA to provide humanitarian assistance following a disaster, the U.S. ambassador or chief of mission must issue a disaster declaration confirming that the magnitude of the disaster exceeds the ability of the host country to respond; the host government has requested or is willing to accept U.S. assistance; and providing assistance is in the interest of the U.S. Government. Upon declaring a disaster, the U.S. ambassador can authorize an initial \$50,000 or more, if the magnitude of the disaster warrants, to assist with response efforts. This relief assistance is typically used for the local purchase and distribution of emergency relief supplies; to purchase fuel to transport existing relief supplies; or to assist with evacuations and search-and-rescue efforts.

During the most recent decade ending in fiscal year (FY) 2015, Mexico had the highest number of U.S. disaster declarations of any country in the region, representing eight of the total 65 disasters declared. Guatemala followed closely with a total of seven disaster declarations,

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The above satellite image shows the eye of Hurricane Irene, the first hurricane of 2011. Courtesy of NASA/NOAA GOES Project



Senior Regional Advisor Tim Callaghan looks at the map inside the Emergency Operations Center for Saint Vincent and the Grenadines during the response to Hurricane Tomas in October 2010. Photo by Cecil Shillingford, USAID/OFDA

USAID/OFDA Prepares for 2016 Hurricane Season

USAID/OFDA has been working diligently to ensure preparedness and response mechanisms are in top shape for hurricane season. The season officially begins in the Atlantic basin on June 1 and the eastern Pacific basin on May 15 and ends on November 30.

The U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has forecast a near-normal 2016 hurricane season in the Atlantic and eastern Pacific basins. In the Atlantic basin, NOAA predicts 10 to 16 named storms, of which four to eight could become hurricanes, including up to four major hurricanes of Category 3 or higher on the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind Scale. NOAA forecasts the formation of 13 to 20 named storms in the eastern Pacific basin, including six to 11 hurricanes, of which three to six could become major hurricanes.

“Even though the forecast calls for an average hurricane season, we know from experience that it takes only one storm to cause significant impacts. The USAID/OFDA regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has been working closely with national governments, partners, and emergency response organizations

in the region to be as prepared as possible and to respond immediately if humanitarian assistance is needed,” said USAID/OFDA Senior Regional Advisor (SRA) Tim Callaghan.

SRA Callaghan and four regional advisors, all experienced disaster management specialists with broad knowledge of the region’s potential hazards, geography, history, and cultural and socioeconomic characteristics, are based at the USAID/OFDA regional office in San José, Costa Rica. These advisors, along with a communications officer, three information officers, a regional network of 29 disaster risk management specialists, and 381 on-call local surge capacity consultants, are available for immediate deployment in response to a disaster. If a hurricane or tropical storm is threatening land, USAID/OFDA may pre-deploy staff in consultation with U.S. missions in potentially affected countries.

Additionally, the USAID/OFDA field office in Haiti has a regional advisor and a program management specialist to help coordinate the response to hydrometeorological hazards and other adverse events in the country. Two USAID/OFDA
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then Honduras, with a total of six declarations, and Nicaragua, with five. In the Caribbean, Haiti had the most disasters declarations related to hydrometeorological events, with a total of five declarations, followed by Jamaica, with four declarations, and the Bahamas and Dominican Republic with three declarations each.

FY 2008 had the most disaster declarations related to hydrometeorological events, tallying 21 declarations, or nearly a third of the past decade's total of 65 declarations. FY 2007 came in a distant second, with eight of the total disaster declarations. In comparison, last year, FY 2015, and the year before, FY 2014, had one disaster declaration each.

In every disaster, USAID/OFDA works closely with host governments and humanitarian organizations to ensure that priority needs are identified and assistance is channeled to the affected populations who need it most.



USAID/OFDA provides emergency supplies to residents of northeastern Nicaragua affected by the Category 5 Hurricane Felix. Photo by Ricardo Herrera, USAID/OFDA

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humanitarian assistance advisors to the military are also stationed at the U.S. Southern Command in Miami, Florida, and help coordinate USAID and U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) emergency humanitarian assistance activities in the region.

USAID/OFDA continually replenishes stockpiled emergency relief supplies, including blankets, hygiene kits, kitchen supplies, plastic sheeting for transitional shelters, and water containers and storage units, for rapid shipment from the USAID/OFDA warehouse in Miami to affected countries as appropriate.

USAID/OFDA also supports partners to maintain emergency relief stockpiles in Haiti. When appropriate, USAID/OFDA may also purchase emergency supplies locally.

Through RDAP, USAID/OFDA maintains 16 aircraft charter purchase order agreements in 10 countries in Central America and the Caribbean to ensure timely transportation of staff and supplies to disaster-affected areas. If commercial service is not available, USAID/OFDA may request assistance from DoD.

In advance of hurricane season, USAID/OFDA briefs mission disaster relief officers and emergency action committees at U.S. missions throughout the region and meets with key partners and other donors to coordinate preparedness activities.



Residents from Gonaives city in Haiti cope with floods after Tropical Storm Hanna. Photo by Maria Luisa Alfaro, USAID/OFDA

Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Tel: +(506) 2290-4133
Email: ofdalac@ofda.gov
Internet: www.usaid.gov

Regional Surge Capacity Program Supports Rapid Response Mechanism

When storms or other disasters simultaneously strike multiple LAC countries, the USAID/OFDA regional office is able to respond within hours by activating local disaster management consultants through its Regional Disaster Assistance Program (RDAP).

The RDAP surge capacity program features 381 on-call local surge capacity consultants based in the 27 LAC countries where RDAP supports disaster response and risk reduction activities and provides preparedness training and technical assistance to strengthen local and national disaster management capabilities. Activation of surge capacity consultants allows USAID/OFDA to quickly expand the capabilities and reach of its disaster assessment and response teams.

Surge capacity consultants have received RDAP training and are familiar with USAID/OFDA response policies, procedures, and protocols, as well as their specific roles and responsibilities when they are activated for disaster assessment and response work in the field. They are well-educated professionals familiar with the local language and customs of their resident country and can provide the USAID/OFDA team with important insights into a country's political and geographic landscapes. They also provide valuable information from on-the-ground assessments and communications with local non-governmental partners, institutions, and government personnel. Once response activities wind down, USAID/OFDA demobilizes the surge capacity consultants.

The RDAP surge capacity program provides USAID/OFDA with an efficient, cost-effective way of rapidly expanding the regional team's ability to prepare for and respond to disasters. For example, during the recent response to the April 16 Ecuador earthquake, USAID/OFDA activated 13 local consultants to assist with information gathering, assessments, and coordination of response activities.

During past hurricane seasons, when hurricanes or storms have affected several countries at once, USAID/OFDA has activated local surge consultants to liaise with local authorities, help coordinate damage evaluations and needs assessments, and provide up-to-date information and reports to the USAID/OFDA regional office or response team in country.

"The high quality of our surge capacity personnel has allowed us to successfully respond to multiple disaster situations at the same time in a timely fashion," commented SRA Callaghan.



Surge capacity consultant Francisco Linares coordinates the delivery of relief supplies in El Salvador after Tropical Storm Agatha. Photo by Sergio D. Gutiérrez, USAID/OFDA