

Name _____



The Changing Face of Disaster

DIRECTIONS: Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

Government legislation to protect and assist people during disasters dates back to the beginning of the nineteenth century when the first piece of “disaster legislation,” the Congressional Act of 1803, was passed in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in order to provide relief to its citizens following a catastrophic fire. For the next hundred years, legislation was passed on an ad hoc basis to assist people in recovering from hurricanes, earthquakes, floods and other natural disasters. The nature of disaster relief changed in the 1930s when the Reconstruction Finance Corporation was given authority to make “disaster loans” so that public facilities could be repaired and rebuilt after an earthquake. The measure was successful, and the RFC continued to make loans to facilitate recovery after other types of disasters.

Similar measures followed. The Bureau of Public Roads was given authority to provide funding for highways and bridges damaged by natural disasters in 1934, and the Flood Control Act of 1965 gave the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers greater authority to implement flood control projects. But the stovepipe nature of this approach became problematic, and later legislation focused on requiring cooperation between federal agencies, as well as executive oversight and

coordination. When massive disasters in the 1960s and 1970 required major federal response and recovery efforts, the Federal Disaster Assistance Administration was established within the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). In 1974, following the National Flood Insurance Act (1968) and the Flood Disaster Protection Act of 1973, President Nixon signed the Disaster Relief Act of 1974, setting the precedent and establishing a process for the president to make disaster declarations.

Disaster response, however, remained fragmented, and depending upon the nature of a disaster, there could sometimes be nearly a hundred federal agencies with some role in responding to or recovering from disasters, hazards and emergencies. The area was in tremendous need of some centralized control. So on April 1, 1979, President Jimmy Carter signed the executive order that created the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), whose mission was, and still remains, to lead America to prepare for, prevent, respond to and recover from disasters. Today, a presidential disaster declaration triggers financial and physical assistance at is all coordinated through FEMA.

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Making Connections in Text

1. What two manners of dealing with disaster does the author compare?

2. How does the author make a comparison between how things were handled by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and the Flood Control Act of 1965?

3. How did the Disaster Relief Act of 1974 change the way that the nation deals with disasters?

4. How does the author transition between the Disaster Relief Act of 1974 and the present day? What does that transitional method say about how things compare between then and now?