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Disaster Debris: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Inspector General Addresses Agency Knowledge of State Preparedness

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Natural disasters such as tornadoes, hurricanes and other severe wind events generate significant amounts of debris that must be collected for disposal.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency (“EPA”) Office of the Inspector General (“OIG”) issued a July 29th report titled *EPA’s Developed Guidance for a Disaster Debris but Has Limited Knowledge of State Preparedness (“Report”)*. See Report No. 16-P-0219.

OIG states that it evaluated whether 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 Report concludes that despite the fact that EPA has worked with other federal agencies in response to natural disasters it has limited information on:

. . . the types of, volumes of and disposal sites for disaster debris that is not hazardous waste.

OIG notes that disaster debris can contain an unsegregated mixture of hazardous and solid waste debris that may be encompassed by EPA’s regulatory authority. The Report further states that obtaining information on the types, volumes and disposal sites for disaster debris enables EPA to communicate and guide the management of potential risks to humans and the environment.

The Report concludes that OLEM has not determined whether states have planned for disaster debris management consistent with EPA guidance. This conclusion is based on interviews with the 10 EPA regional offices. It believes certain regions are unaware of the status or content of state disaster debris plans and unaware of whether such plans address the components defined in guidance the agency published titled *Planning for Natural Disaster Debris*.

States are not federally required to develop debris management plans. Further, EPA has no authority to ensure that states have adequate plans or that they follow their plans during a disaster response. Concern is expressed by OIG that EPA’s failure to determine the adequacy of state plans means it could not assess states’ readiness to manage debris. The failure to make such a determination is stated to risk disaster debris not being managed or disposed in an environmentally sound manner.

EPA Regions 4 and 5 are cited as examples of “good practices” for disaster debris management such as:

- 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

OIG recommends 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 recommend that OLEM develop a plan to provide assistance to states to address the major elements identified in EPA guidance.

[A copy of the OIG report can be downloaded here.](#)