

Background (summary)

The Strategic National Risk Assessment (SNRA) was designed to help Federal and community decision-makers prioritize and plan for the greatest risks to the Nation, with math, science, and evidence.

Origin

In 2011, FEMA asked DHS for a master risk assessment that would compare every threat and hazard in FEMA's mission space – a One Ring To Rule Them All of national risk – using math, science, and evidence that FEMA could defend. DHS's analysts gave FEMA what it asked for. DHS has been trying to put that genie back into its bottle since.⁸⁴

The former DHS Office of Risk Management & Analysis (RMA) created the SNRA for FEMA in 2011. RMA accomplished this by adding hurricanes, pandemics, and other natural/accidental/malevolent hazards to the existing comparative framework of the classified DHS terrorism risk assessments⁸⁵ which determine[d] what goes into the Strategic National Stockpile. DHS/FEMA updated the SNRA itself in 2015. FEMA's update focused on building out a fully unclassified version that its state and local stakeholders could see and use.

The U.S. national risk assessment

The SNRA is a national risk assessment. It makes comparative judgements between risks – chemical accidents vs. terrorist bombings, nuclear meltdowns vs. pandemics, geo-magnetic storms vs. a second 9/11 – touching the equities, responsibilities, and budgets of every Department in the U.S. Government. It expresses those risks in common mathematical terms, allowing direct comparison and resource allocation decisions between functions and agencies in a way that the Government has never been able to do before. What the national Budget does for revenue and spending, the SNRA does for national risk.

At present, the U.S. Government manages national risk in the same way that it managed the national accounts a century ago, before the creation of the unified Budget. The Government makes risk tradeoff decisions in program siloes, or decision-by-decision, judging costs and benefits in isolation from other risk management decisions, like the decision that the CEA's Warp Speed analysis supported. The SNRA breaks down those walls for risk, like the Budget does for money.

A national risk assessment is an entirely new thing in American government. I believe that many of the SNRA's problems may stem from this: without a pre-existing frame of reference, decision-makers who encounter it don't have the standard of comparison needed to understand just how much this thing will empower citizens, and empower accountable government.

FEMA's master risk assessment

The SNRA's quantitative method makes FEMA's planning assumptions explicit in a way that makes it possible for any expert, critic, or citizen to examine and question them, to an extent that no other kind of analysis that DHS, FEMA, or any other U.S. Government entity practices can do.

If they could see it. Once the agency got what it wanted from us in 2015 – an updated master risk assessment that FEMA could claim as evidential confirmation for its updated planning assumptions – it buried the risk assessment to protect those assumptions, and those claims, from scrutiny.

We see reproducibility as an essential feature of competent and accountable government. Show me what numbers, assumptions, and equations you used: and then show me how they add up to what you say they add up to.

- John Graham, OMB Office of
Information & Regulatory Affairs,
March 2002

⁸⁴ From 2012-15 DHS HQ was making the decisions and FEMA was the impacted party. Since 2015 DHS/FEMA has been making the decisions itself for the SNRA. DHS HQ returned to this analytic line of work for its own planning needs in 2016, but did not interfere with FEMA. I don't know what (if any) role DHS HQ had in FEMA's decisions after 2016.

⁸⁵ The DHS Integrated CBRN Terrorism Risk Assessment (ITRA) and its biological (BTRA), chemical (CTRA), and radiological-nuclear (RNTRA) components (notes 42 and 43 above).