

Ponca Tribe of Nebraska and FEMA Sign Historic Pact for Disaster Recovery

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LINCOLN, Neb. – The Ponca Tribe of Nebraska and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) have signed an historic agreement that paves the way for a nation-to-nation partnership in disaster recovery from the severe storms and flooding that occurred March 13 to April 1, 2019.

Tribal Chairman Larry Wright, Jr. and Federal Coordinating Officer Constance C. Johnson-Cage of FEMA met July 16, 2019 to sign a formal Tribal/FEMA Agreement, which completes the legal requirements for federal assistance under the major disaster declaration issued by President Trump June 17, 2019.

With the signing, the Ponca became one of the first tribes to be granted its own disaster declaration, independent from any state government. In 2013, Congress amended federal laws to allow tribes to make a direct request for such aid.

“This whole process, what we’ve been through, really shows the importance of that government-to-government relationship that tribal nations have with the federal government. We can only truly be sovereign nations if we act like sovereign nations,” said Chairman Wright. “This is something that we can control, to make sure that we are directly affecting our tribal citizens and all the communities that we live in.”

The declaration makes federal funding available to reimburse the tribe for 75 percent of the eligible disaster costs—including debris removal, emergency protective measures and the repair and restoration of damaged infrastructure. Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) funds are also available for projects to prevent or reduce long-term risk to life and property from future disasters.



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Although the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska does not have a reservation, the Ponca Restoration Act established its 15-county Service Delivery Area across Nebraska, Iowa and South Dakota. Under this tribal disaster declaration—which covers its entire service area:

- FEMA Public Assistance grants go directly to the tribe. The tribe does not have to wait for any state—Nebraska, Iowa, or South Dakota—to disburse the funds.
- Based on its own mitigation plan, the tribe develops HMGP projects that go to FEMA for review and possible funding.
- The tribe assumes all administrative duties required under PA. FEMA pays a set percentage to the tribe to cover administrative costs.

“We commit to walking with the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska, providing tools and guidance needed to be successful,” said FCO Johnson-Cage. “I sincerely look forward to this partnership. It was truly an honor and a privilege to participate in the signing ceremony.”

The disaster struck March 13, when snow melt and hard rains saturated the frozen ground in the Niobrara area. Ice jams caused swollen river banks to overflow, flooding the area, including the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska’s ancestral homelands. Then the overwhelmed Spencer Dam broke, pushing 11-foot swells through the Niobrara River. Rushing waters and enormous chunks of ice were forced over the land, destroying bridges, roads, homes and businesses. The community was left without water and power. Without the Mormon Canal Bridge, surrounding areas, including the Ponca Tribe agency grounds, were cut off from the town of Niobrara.

The Ponca Tribe immediately took action. On March 15, 2019, Chairman Wright issued a Declaration of Emergency. Updates on the closure of roads, schools and businesses, the restoration of power and water, and the impact on tourism and agriculture were provided via the tribe’s website and social media channels.

Showing spiritual strength as individuals, the Ponca helped their neighbors, cleaned out flooded homes, and collected donations for the whole community-



including thousands of Yazidi families who recently immigrated from Syria and Iraq. The tribe has continued to be deeply involved in recovery efforts, hosting 60 residents—both Ponca and non-Ponca—at its tribal headquarters in Niobrara March 28 to discuss disaster recovery.

As a result of winter weather events throughout the Midwest, several other federal disaster declarations may affect Ponca households throughout its 15-county service area:

- On March 21, 2019, a declaration made FEMA Individual Assistance available for homeowners and renters in Nebraska.
- On March 23, 2019, a declaration made IA available in Iowa.
- On June 7, 2019, a declaration made IA and PA available in South Dakota.

For more information on the disaster recovery operation for the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska, please visit [fema.gov/disaster/4446](https://www.fema.gov/disaster/4446) or [poncatribene.org](https://www.poncatribene.org). Follow us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/PoncaTribeOfNebraska/>

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