Additional flood aid outlook uncertain

Next chance for funds comes next month

BY THE NUMBERS

$1.69 BILLION state has received
$2 BILLION estimated further need
1 PERCENT amount of received aid that has been distributed

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Louisiana leaders still are asking the federal government for more money to aid the recovery from last year's historic floods, but a year after the storm, it remains unclear how much more the state should expect.

Louisiana has received nearly $1.7 billion spread over two appropriations from Congress since the flood. The next bite at the apple comes next month, when Congress must approve another federal spending plan to keep the government running.

But two significant questions linger: How hard will President Donald Trump's administration push for the state to receive additional aid? And how much?

Gov. John Bel Edwards, a Democrat who has personally appealed to the Republican president for additional flood recovery dollars, estimates that at least $2 billion more is needed.

More than 95 percent of the aid Louisiana has received so far came during President Barack Obama's administration, which had backed similar disaster recovery programs in the past. Since taking office in January, Trump's administration supported a third round of funding for Louisiana, but at a fraction of what Edwards and the state's congressional delegation had sought. Additionally, Trump's administration has called for the end of a program traditionally used to funnel long-term recovery dollars to states.

Edwards spokesman Richard Carbo said the governor continues to make the case for additional aid.

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"They've been very receptive," Carbo said. "The administration has shown nothing but support for answering the needs of the state." U.S. Rep. Garret Graves, a Baton Rouge Republican who represents some of the hardest-hit areas, said this week that he also thinks the Trump administration is receptive to supporting additional aid — if the state can demonstrate that it is needed.

"It's very difficult to quantify the unmet needs when so much money's in the bank," Graves said.

About 1 percent of the $1.69 billion the state has received for the flood recovery has been doled out, after the state waited months for the federal government to grant access to the funds.

State officials say they are promoting homeowner and business owner surveys through door-to-door campaigns, public service announcements and robocalls. People must fill out the surveys to be in the pipeline to qualify for aid, but leaders say they also must provide documentation to support the state's requests for additional money from the federal government.

About 40,000 of 46,000 surveys have been completed so far. State leaders say it remains thousands fewer than the estimated need.

"Certainly, it's been a little harder than I wanted it to be," Edwards said recently of the effort to get more people surveyed.

The Restore Louisiana Task Force has set aside $1.3 billion to help homeowners rebuild their flooded homes.

Another $134 million is dedicated to programs to help renter housing, $62 million to small-business assistance, $105 million for infrastructure and $9.8 million for watershed efforts.

"There are needs that are unmet," Carbo said. "We're going to continue to make that case.

Federal aid after disasters typically follows the flow of recovery in waves. The first wave is Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which doesn't require congressional action and is largely dedicated toward repairs for individuals, like hotel stays and replacement of essentials. FEMA also covers assistance for state and local government recovery efforts.

Assistance for homeowners' and business owners' long-term recovery needs is approved by Congress outside of FEMA. Traditionally, it has flowed to Louisiana through the Community Development Block Grant Program under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, as it did with the nearly $1.7 billion in long-term recovery assistance that has been granted to Louisiana for last year's floods, and the recovery dollars that followed hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005.

The Trump administration earlier this year released a "budget blueprint" for Congress that calls for eliminating Community Development Block Grant funds entirely, and the White House has been unclear about what path it would take in times of disaster. The blueprint document says the budget "devolves community and economic development activities to the state and local level, and redirects federal resources to other activities." Asked about the administration's view of the need for additional aid for Louisiana, a White House spokesman said, "The Trump administration is committed to supporting state and local efforts to prepare for, respond to and protect from disasters which includes homeland security.

A year into Louisiana's flood recovery and at the peak of hurricane season, the Trump administration has not faced a large-scale, billion-dollar disaster, so it has yet to demonstrate how it would react.

Both Trump and Vice President Mike Pence traveled to the Baton Rouge area in the immediate aftermath of the floods and saw the damage firsthand.

Pence, during a trip back to Louisiana this summer to meet with business leaders, returned to a home that they previously visited. It's been rebuilt through aid from Samaritan's Purse, an evangelical Christian aid organization — not the federally funded state assistance program, which began distributing funds only a week after Pence toured the full rebuild Denham Springs home.

About $51.4 million, roughly 3 percent of the flood recovery money received so far, has been allocated since Trump took office. That's about 25 percent of the state's additional $2 billion ask.

Graves said he is seeking additional waivers from HUD policy changes that could free up money and cut through red tape.

"We still have people living in gutted homes, tents, trailers and other conditions that are not acceptable," Graves said. "That's an example of why people are so frustrated with government."

Graves said he thinks the state should have moved more rapidly and wondered whether the state has run into the unusual problem of having low participation among homeowners because many have moved on and sought alternative means to recover.

Graves and Edwards have maintained that the federal administration has not done enough to aid the state's recovery effort.

"I've had strong concerns about how this disaster has been managed," Graves said. "The data doesn't lie, and it is difficult to justify or substantiate those timelines."

Edwards, meanwhile, repeatedly has pointed to the federal government as the cause of delays and frequently mentions the "historic" speed of Louisiana's recovery efforts.

On the first anniversary of Hurricane Ida, New York City, New York State and New Jersey had distributed no money through their homeowner reconstruction programs. The Texas Observer reported that two years after Hurricane Ike, Texas had disbursed less than 3 percent of the $1.7 billion set aside for housing recovery.

"I am as frustrated as anybody," Edwards said. "We're working as hard as we can."