Lawmakers raise flood recovery concerns

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Louisiana lawmakers on Wednesday aired their frustrations over the state’s recovery from last year’s historic floods and the aid that’s being provided to its victims.

Chief among their complaints: a federal rule that prohibits homeowners from receiving grant assistance if they took on Small Business Administration loans that they must now pay off, and questions about what is being done to prevent a similar disaster from happening in the future.

“It’s irresponsible to talk about rebuilding the community without talking about what we are going to do to prevent it from happening again,” said Rep. Valarie Hodges, a Denham Springs Republican whose home flooded in August.

“If we don’t do something about this to me, it should be criminal.”

The House Select Committee on Homeland Security met for more than three hours to get an in-depth update on where the recovery stands.

Louisiana has received nearly $1.7 billion in federal disaster recovery aid, the bulk of which will go toward helping homeowners rebuild. The state is in the process of setting up the homeowners assistance programs. The first construction work is expected to begin next month, said Pat Forbes, who is leading the recovery planning as the director of the Office of Community Development.

Homeowners will have the option of using a state-selected contractor for repairs, choosing their own contractor or getting reimbursed for work they’ve already done.

The programs will be rolled out in phases, with the elderly and disabled in the first priority phase.

But legislators said they are concerned about people who already have taken out SBA loans to repair their homes. Because of federal aid restrictions that treat the loans as disaster assistance, the loan amount would be deducted from any grant award those homeowners may otherwise receive.

“A guy that has just retired just got on the hook for a 30-year loan, and he could have qualified for something like this,” said Rep. Lance Harris, R-Alexandria. “It’s just sad in my opinion.”

Rep. Barry Ivey, R-Central, said he thinks the federal law should be changed to eliminate the quirk.

“I think our congressmen need to start working on that,” Ivey said. “It doesn’t make any sense to me. It’s just not right.”

Rep. Rogers Pope, another Denham Springs Republican whose home flooded, said he would rate the federal SBA assistance as “a colossal failure” following the flood.

“I don’t think there’s anywhere on the alphabet that I could give SBA a grade,” he said. “It’s that low.”

The Wednesday hearing served as a general update from Gov. John Bel Edwards’ administration on the flood response and recovery efforts.

Several of the members spoke of their own experience or that of their constituents. Leaders estimate that at least 43,900 homes were affected by the flood that swept south Louisiana in August and an earlier flood primarily in north Louisiana last spring.

Edwards’ administration is seeking an additional $2 billion in assistance from the federal government, nearly half of which would go to complete homeowners assistance programs. Forbes said that amount would need to be increased if the SBA rule were to change, to account for the additional availability of money for homeowners.

The governor also is seeking federal aid to complete projects that experts say could help prevent future floods, including the Comite River Diversion Canal project.

“This is going to happen again, if we don’t do something about it,” Hodges said.

Sen. Bodi White, a Central Republican who chairs the Senate Homeland Security Committee, said he thinks the state has been too slow in the recovery effort and should have a plan that kicks in when disasters happen, speeding up the process of seeking federal aid.

“We should have a master plan, ‘This is what we do,’ ” White said. “It’s not like we don’t have a disaster every year in this state.”

White and others questioned why the state began taking basic information from flood-affected homeowners only this week. “I feel like we could have been farther along with people in our database,” White said.

Forbes said the state received access to the federal money with the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s final approval only this week, and state leaders didn’t know exactly when that would happen. An earlier intake process, he said, could have created confusion or frustration as people waited for an undetermined amount of time.