State granted access to flood recovery dollars

Online survey launched for homeowners

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Nearly eight months after historic floods swept across south Louisiana, the state has been granted access to the federal funds it needs to establish programs meant to help homeowners rebuild.

Gov. John Bel Edwards' administration received final approval late Monday afternoon that it can begin drawing down more than $1.6 billion in flood recovery dollars approved by Congress last fall.

The timing comes just as the state launched an online survey that is serving as the initial intake for the planned homeowners' assistance program application process.

The state is this week setting up environmental reviews that the federal government requires to access the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development dollars.

"The process for drawing down the flood recovery funds is long and sometimes overly burdensome," Edwards said in a statement. "While it is often frustrating that we can't get assistance to homeowners quicker, we are able to immediately move forward with our recovery plans."

Edwards had sought a waiver from the federal government that would have removed the environmental review requirement, but one was not granted.

More than 4,000 people filled out the initial online survey to get into the assistance application process. The process is not first-come, first-serve; and

Garrette Celestine and his daughter Shanell paddle back from their flooded home Aug. 18 in Lafayette. More than 4,000 people filled out an initial online survey to get into a homeowners' assistance application process.

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Homeowners will have several weeks to complete it.

Nearly $1.2 billion in the assistance approved by Congress will go toward helping homeowners rebuild from the floods. Edwards, a Democrat, is seeking $2.2 billion in additional federal flood aid, nearly half of which would go toward homeowner assistance programs.

The state is in the final stages of hiring a contractor to oversee the home rebuilding programs, after scraping an initial round amid concerns over the costs and licensing.

Edwards' spokesman Richard Carbo said the state already has a firm in place that conducts environmental reviews, which will be managed by the Office of Community Development. Carbo said the data collected Monday from the survey provided enough information to fast-track the review process.

The release of the funds had become a point of contention between Edwards and members of the congressional delegation in recent weeks as funds had not yet filtered down to homeowners.

The programs the state will launch include an option for homeowners to select a contractor who will be paid by the state for work performed; a state-run rebuilding program; and a smaller reimbursement program for people who have already rebuilt their flood-damaged homes.

Edwards has said additional funds, if approved by Congress, will go toward expanding those programs.

The first two tranches of federal aid are coming to the state through semi-flexible block grants that Congress approved through stopgap funding measures that kept the federal government from shutting down.

The next such spending measure, formally called a continuing resolution, would need to be approved by April 28 to prevent a government shutdown.

Edwards, who has made repeated trips to Washington, D.C., including an appearance before a Congressional hearing next week, told The Advocate editorial board in a meeting Monday that he feels confident about the state's chances of securing additional aid, following meetings with the Trump administration.

"They agree with our numbers in terms of the unmet need," he said. "The fact that it hasn't happened yet doesn't cause me any concerns."