PRIMER FOR FEMA'S PUBLIC ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR DISASTERS

- DISASTER DECLARATIONS -

By Larry Southwick

In the April 2007 APWA Reporter, there was an article titled "Tornado makes direct hit on Iowa City" that concluded with the statement: "After 90 days of contemplation, FEMA's Damage Assessment Team concluded that this event was not a federal disaster and no assistance was provided." Within the article, it stated that "the total damage was assessed at $18 million." Why wasn't that a federal disaster?

COUNTY BASIS FOR DECLARATIONS
FEMA disasters are declared for a state or a county-by-county basis. A disaster will not be declared for an individual city. For example, the FEMA website, www.fema.gov, shows that Washington State was declared June 18, 2006 for damages occurring on December 14-15, 2006, but not for Iowa. Iowa was not declared for damages occurring on December 14-15, 2006. The county-wide damage value must meet the disaster criteria. You can see from the above Iowadc example, $12 million damages for a single county could be catastrophic but not enough to meet the disaster criteria. The rest of the county could have been entirely undamaged, leaving the county-wide damage value below the criteria. That is why Iowa City was not declared.

PROCESS FOR DISASTER DECLARATIONS
The process is spelled out in Washington state law, RCW 38.52, and federal regulations. After a major emergency event, the local county emergency management agency gathers damage assessment information and report that to the state emergency management agency who then report to the governor. The governor, in consultation with the state agency, determines if a disaster declaration is warranted and whether to ask for federal assistance. If FEMA is requested to assist, a joint state-federal effort will conduct a Preliminary Damage Assessment (PDA).

After an emergency event, the damage estimates are very preliminary and unvalidated. Dollar values are all over the place with no certain level of accuracy. Damage Assessment Teams are mobilized by both the state and FEMA and coordinated out of the state emergency management office. Teams are dispatched to each impacted county where they meet with the local county emergency management and/or local agencies staff. Theoretically, each damaged site in the county is inspected and evaluated but realistically, the major sites are the primary focus. Time and resources are limited so something like the 80-20 rule is used to validate the damage estimates. Some sites may be inaccessible and the best available information is used. A dollar value is
estimated for each site and all sites within the county are summarized in a report. Costs for emergency services during the disaster event and costs to clean up debris after an event are eligible and must be included in the report. Most of those costs are force account by local agencies. Costs for emergency services during the event only include overtime and not regular staff time because the agency has already budgeted for its own staff regardless of the event. Regular staff time can be included in permanent repair costs for reimbursement by FEMA.

Geographically speaking, the objective for damage assessment is to determine if the county and/or local agencies on a county-wide basis can reasonably afford to handle the damage on their own without federal assistance. The current number is about $1 per capita for each county. Other factors are taken into account to evaluate the county's financial ability to pay for it without federal assistance.

The Damage Assessment Teams report all of their separate county assessments to the state emergency management office where a team of state and FEMA officials prepare a report for the state that is submitted to FEMA headquarters in Washington, D.C., for a final determination. FEMA headquarters then makes a recommendation to the President who makes the official declaration.

OBSERVATIONS


I have participated in several damage assessment teams. Most members are retired public employees with a wide variety of experience. The state takes the lead and dispatches at least one of its own members with each team. Several different divisions within FEMA may be included making up a team of three to five members. The teams all gather at the state emergency management offices and are briefed on the assignments before being dispatched to the local counties. Team leaders contact the local county emergency management office and arrange for coordinating site inspections. Field inspections are conducted with the local county and/or agency staff. After

Monroe, WA, 1/20/2006 – Disaster applicants Marilyn and Darin Hendrickson receive assistance with their FEMA application from FEMA Application Specialist Bruce Halliday and Sheldon Tetas, FEMA opened the DRCs to help flood victims with their FEMA applications. Marilyn Nauman/FEMA photo

the inspections are complete, the team meets with the county staff and prepares a summary of the damage assessment. Depending on the event and the available resources, a team may work with one or more counties. The objective is to get valid, state-wide information in a short period of time so the teams move quickly. The dollar values may still be rough but they are representative of the overall damage in each county.

The process relies on local agencies providing realistic damage estimates and getting that information to their local county emergency management agency in a timely manner. The county then needs to efficiently gather and summarize that information and provide it to the state. All of that information is then used during the FDR process to validate the damage estimates. Damages must have occurred during and be caused by the disaster event itself and be to eligible property. For example, landscaping is generally not eligible and riverbank erosion that does not impact an improved facility is not eligible. I have witnessed more than one example of ineligible damages that were submitted by the local agency in hopes of obtaining federal assistance for repairs. That slows down the process and affects the local agency's credibility.

PRIVATE PROPERTY

All of the above describes the process for public agency damage assessment. An entirely separate but similar process is used to evaluate private property damages, again on a county-wide basis. FEMA can fund disasters for private property damages, called Individual Assistance (IA), in a similar manner to Public Assistance (PA). A disaster declaration will specify separately for both PA and IA per each eligible county.

For example, the FEMA website shows that the Washington Severe Storms, Flooding, Landslides and Mudslides for November 2-11, 2006 included 11 counties for Individual Assistance but none for Public Assistance. On the other hand, the December 14-15 event included 19 counties for Public Assistance but none for Individual Assistance. I have participated in private property damage assessment but not in the process for the Individual Assistance reimbursement. I have only worked for Public Assistance which affects local public agencies. If you have any questions, please contact me.

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