

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 60 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 \$12 million." Why wasn't that a federal disaster?

COUNTY BASIS FOR DECLARATIONS

FEMA disasters are declared for a state on 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 Severe Winter Storms, Landslides, and Mudslides for damages occurring on December 14-15, 2006 was declared on February 14, 2007 for 19 counties. The county-wide damage value must meet the disaster criteria. You can see from the above Iowa City example, \$12 million damages for a single city could be catastrophic but 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 agencies gather damage assessment information and report that to the state emergency management



Index, WA, 1/27/07 - Two FEMA workers point to where the stairs used to be attached to this sky tram before flood waters washed the stairs and part of the landing away. This is the only access to a resident's house across the river. FEMA helped replace the stairs and landing with its Individuals and Households Program. Marvin Nauman/FEMA photo

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 on 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.

Generally 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

The State of Washington Emergency Management website, <http://emd.wa.gov/>, has a detailed evaluation titled "December 2006 Windstorm Response After Action Report". I suggest that each local agency print a copy and circulate it for your own emergency management planning purposes. It includes some very good suggestions. (http://www.wadisasternews.com/posted/1105/FINAL_AAR_040407.153345.pdf)

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, 12/20/06 – Disaster applicants Marilyn and Duane Hendrickson receive assistance with their FEMA application from FEMA Application Specialists Bruce Haley and Sheldon Tarasut. FEMA opened the DRCs to help Flood Victims with their FEMA applications. Marvin 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 damages 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 PDA 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 as for Public Assistance (PA). A disaster declaration will specify separately for both IA and PA for 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. ■



KLEINFELDER

Geotechnical Engineering
Rock Engineering
Water Resources
Well Services
Material Testing & Inspection
Risk Analysis & Toxicology

Learn more about us online at
www.kleinfelder.com or call (425) 562-4200

